American Songwriter

November | December 2016
Vol. 32, No. 1

the craft of music

Dolly Parton
American Hustler

BEYONCÉ'S "DADDY LESSONS"

THE HOLIDAY GEAR GUIDE

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BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

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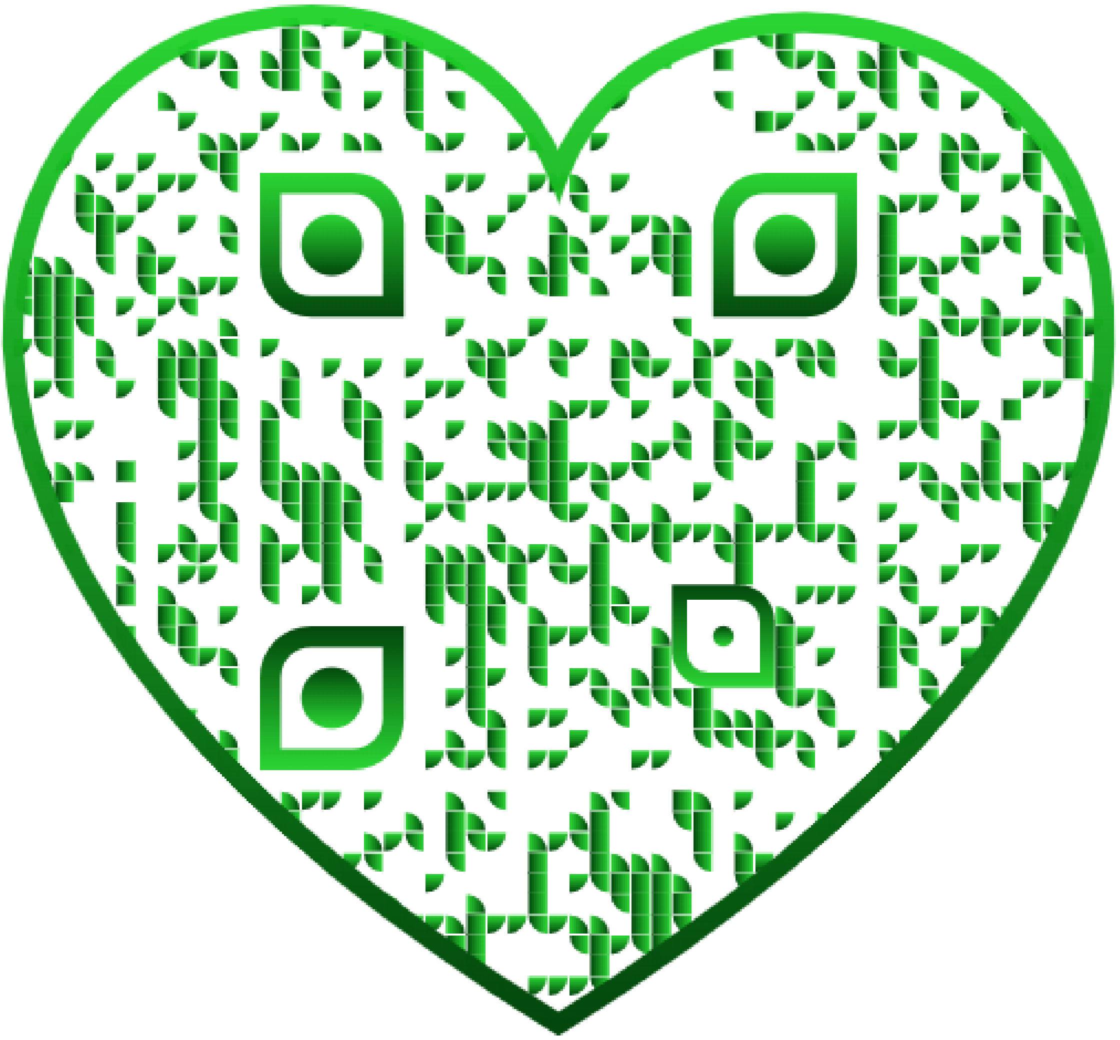

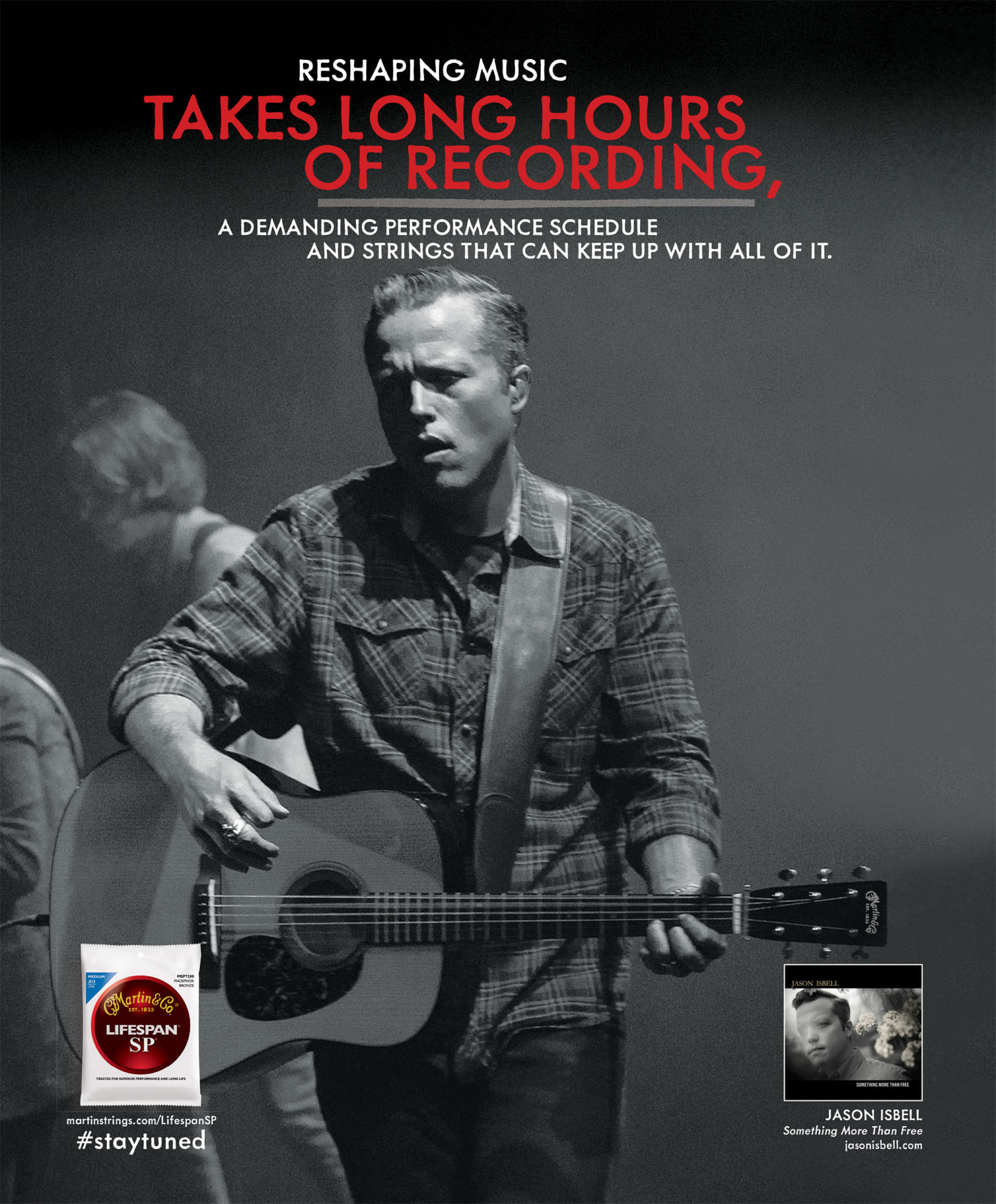
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MC Taylor explores the tension between home and touring on his new LP *Heart Like A Levee*.

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The acclaimed four-piece's third album is its boldest yet.

THE HOLIDAY GEAR GUIDE
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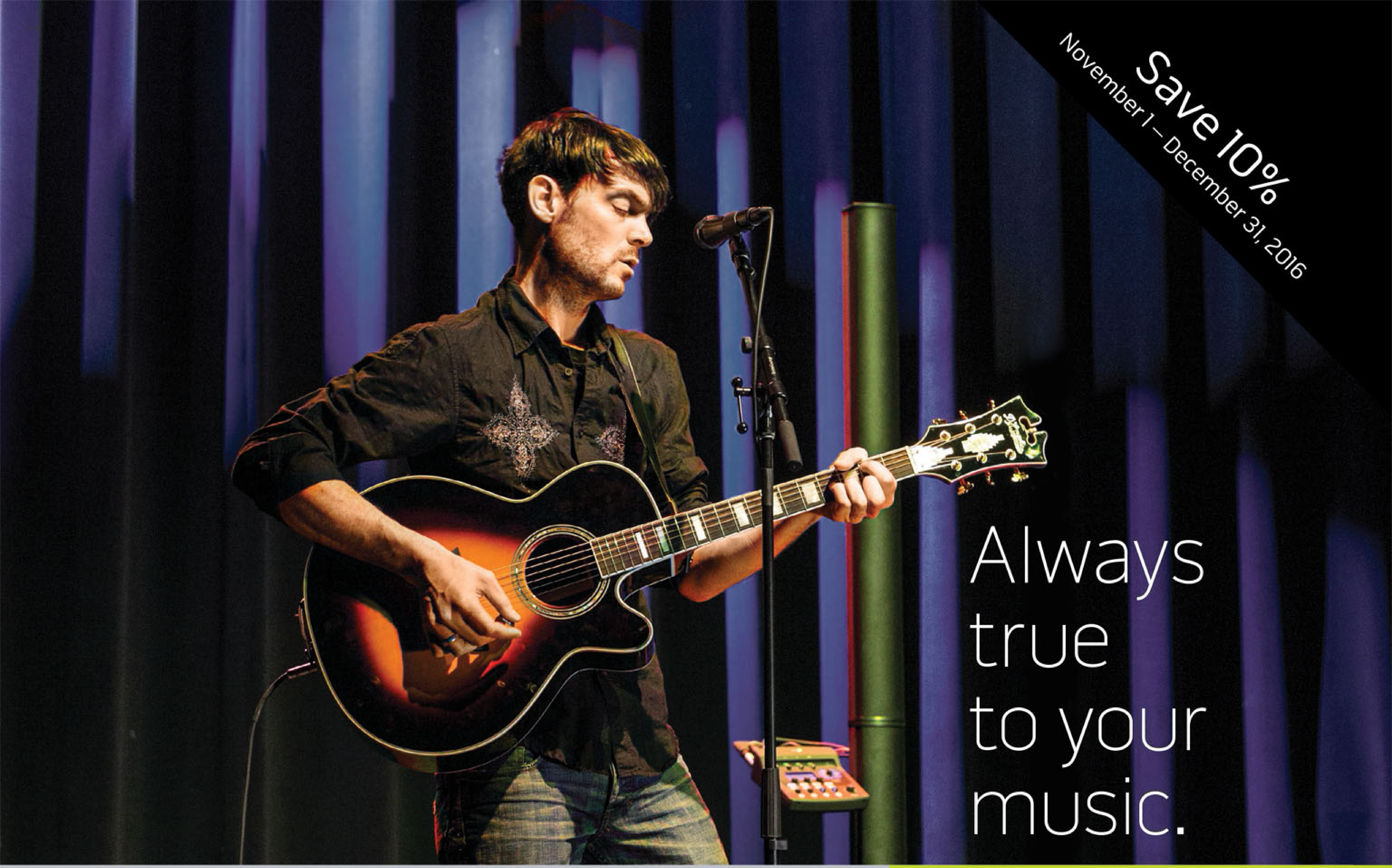

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EDITOR'S NOTE

COAT OF MANY COLORS

This issue, featuring a beaming Dolly Parton on the cover, is one of our more eclectic editions in recent memory, showcasing a wide range of artists from various niches on the pop and roots music spectrums.

From the legendary Parton to punk stalwarts Against Me! to an article by Dawes' Taylor Goldsmith, there is a little something for everyone.

Parton, who is appearing on the cover for the third time in the magazine's 31-year history, is one of the most esteemed songwriters in the history of country music, and the east Tennessee native continues to write prolifically, even into her seventh decade. In our cover story, she bristles with excitement when talking about her new project, *Pure & Simple*, a song cycle that pays tribute to her 50-year marriage, and to the concept of love itself.

When writing songs, Parton draws from the clay of her own life, telling Brittney McKenna that all the songs she wrote for the album derive from her own relationships, or those of her friends and family.

Later in this issue, in our Role Models column, Taylor Goldsmith of Dawes pays tribute to songwriter Will Oldham, better known by his stage moniker Bonnie 'Prince' Billy. Ever since discovering Oldham's music, Goldsmith writes that he is trying to abandon writing about his personal life, taking a seemingly opposite approach from that of Parton.

2016 has been a banner year for Bruce Springsteen, one that saw the release of his 500-plus page autobiography *Born To Run*, not to mention an exhaustive tour of the U.S. and Europe to celebrate his double album *The River*. We were lucky to catch one of the final shows in Philadelphia, back in September, which, at four hours and two minutes, stands as the second-longest of his career. As his memoir makes clear, Springsteen draws heavily from his own life when writing songs, but he also takes from other places as well. The source of those songs, though, seems almost like a moot point when you take in one of his shows, and consider just how deeply those tunes have ingrained themselves in the psyche and emotional life of his fandom.

Caine O'Rear

Caine O'Rear
Editor-in-Chief

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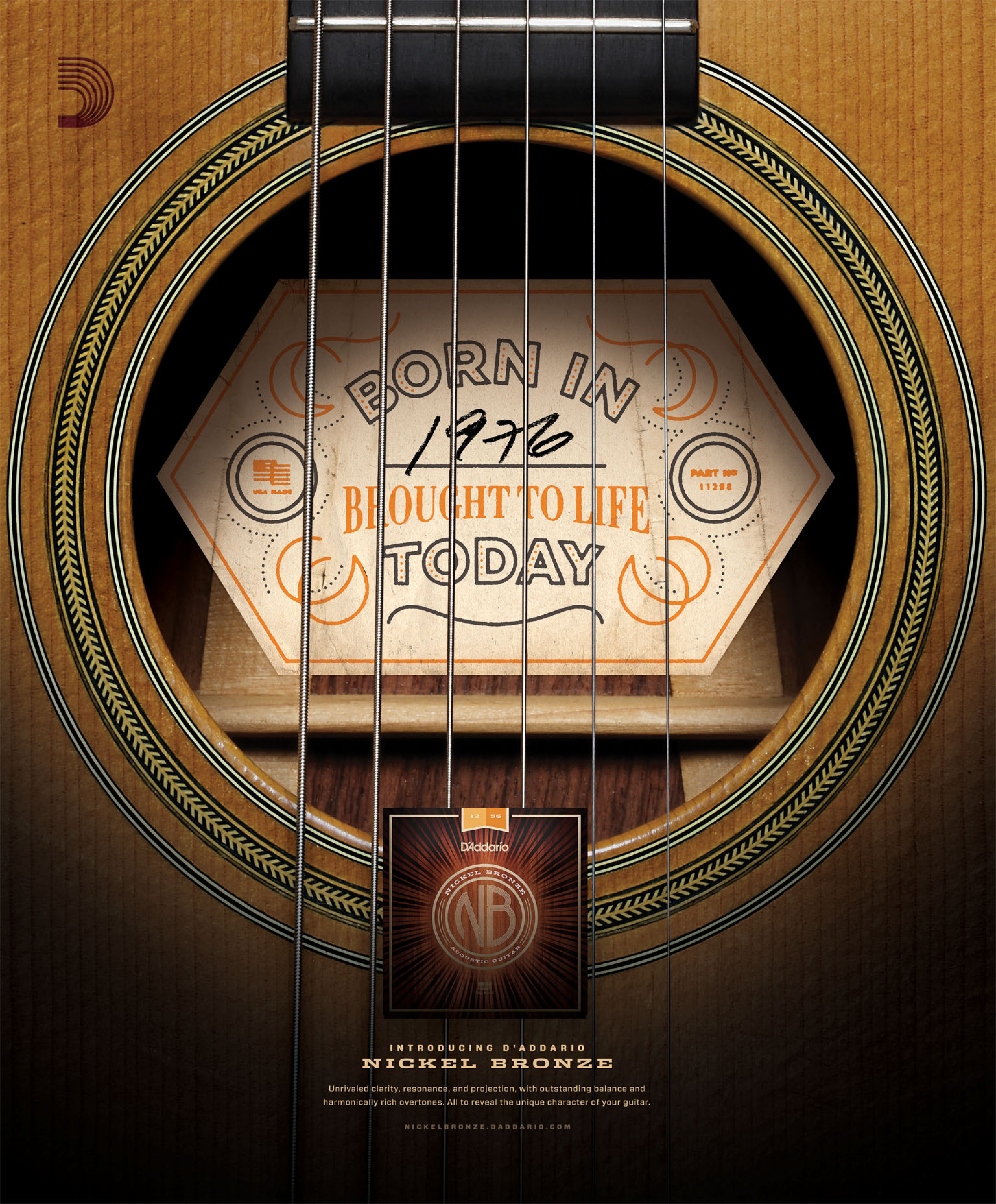
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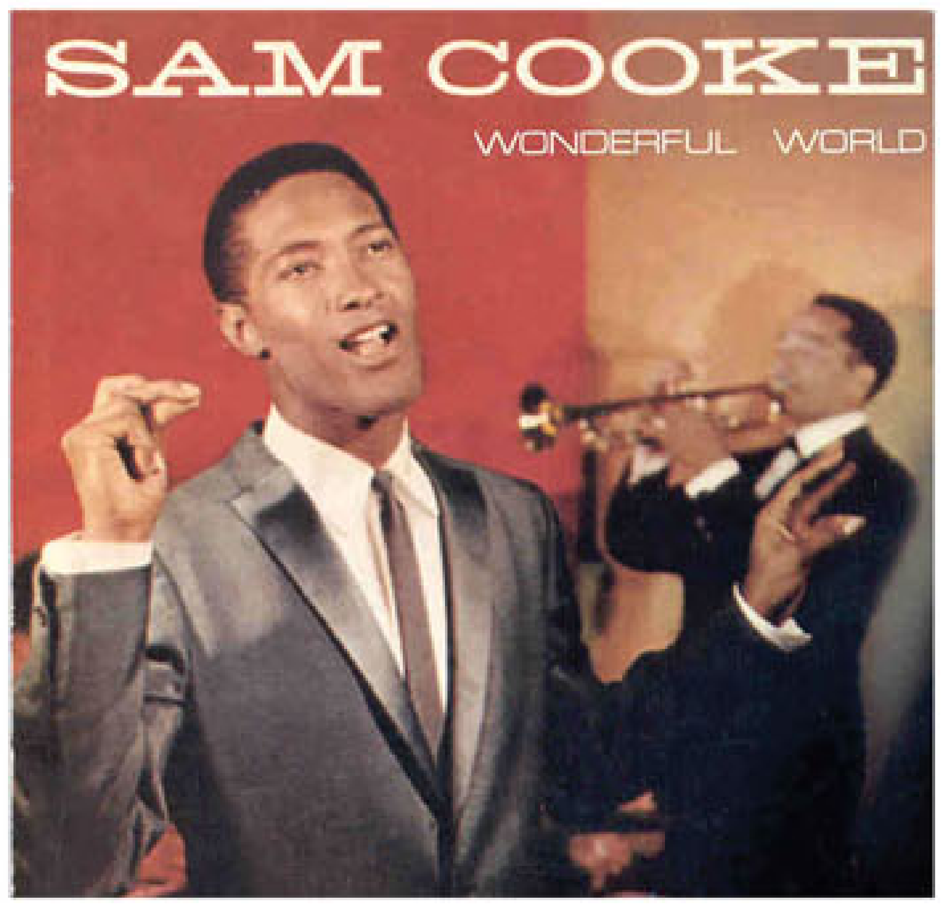

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"At Last," Etta James
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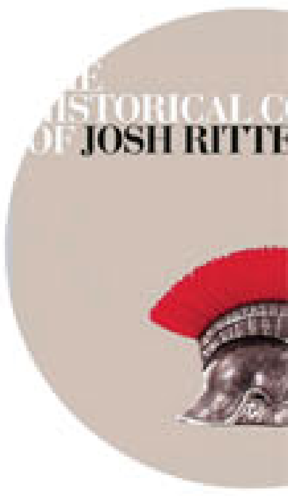

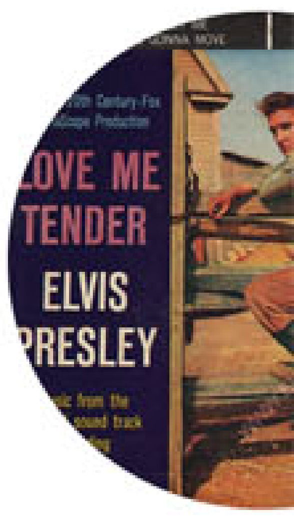

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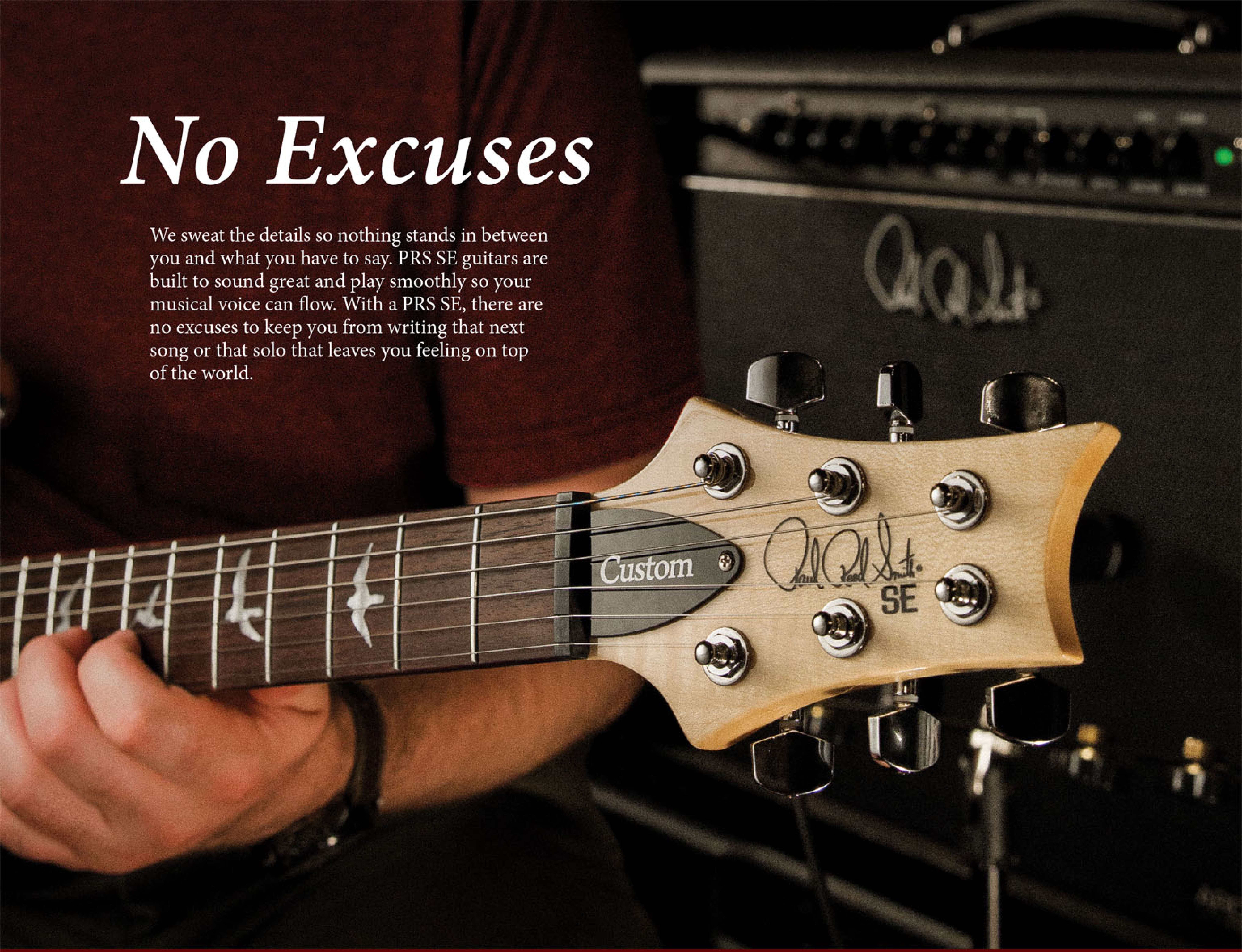

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WILD BEASTS

LUST FOR LIFE

BY KATIE CHOW

(Left to r) Ben Little, Hayden Thorpe, Chris Talbot, Tom Fleming

The best music sounds either powerfully human or completely beyond all life on earth. Wild Beasts have always firmly been the former, and they prove it by reaching for a higher plane on their latest album.

Far from the pastoral delicacy of their early work, *Boy King* is a searing, claws-out rock record. Revolving around the titular concept of control and indulgence, it sees the band embracing the bombast they once rejected as teenagers in rural northern England. To follow up 2014's darkly slick *Present Tense*, the band decamped to Dallas to John Congleton's studio. Five albums into their career, the change of scenery and sunlight proved vital for a band that's often labeled quintessentially British.

"The most monumental difference, psychologically, between Texas and London was just the ownership of emotions," singer and bassist Hayden Thorpe says. "Americans and Texans, to speak stereotypically, take far more ownership over their emotional state."

Congleton pushed their newfound freedom even further. Having worked with artists such as St. Vincent, Cloud Nothings, and Anna Calvi, the producer's raw-edged sonic palette was vital to Thorpe, alongside co-frontman Tom Fleming, multi-instrumentalist Ben Little, and drummer Chris Talbot.

"Bands need gurus, groups of people need telling what to do," Thorpe says with a knowing grin. "If you're in a band, you're woefully insecure, so you need some sort of guidance, someone to help you out," adds Fleming.

Lead single "Get My Bang," a slinky contemplation of consumerism, was designated as the album's centerpiece early on and caused a year of sleepless nights before the band headed to Dallas.

"We took this six minute long odyssey to John, and he said, 'I'll take the last 30 seconds and put it at the start, and we'll go from there,'" Thorpe recounts. "Half an hour later, we had a song that wouldn't have been made unless we were there on that day with that guy in that place."

Spontaneity was key in the studio, with Congleton promoting a first thought, best thought approach. "That's kind of John's mentality: if you're going to do something, do it once with confidence, don't do it five times and pussyfoot around," Fleming describes.The result is decidedly less polished than its predecessor, with its own gritty allure.

"If someone were to take a microscope to our record, they'd probably say, 'That needs to go into Photoshop, you need to clean this up and give it a tighter bum,'" Thorpe laughs.

While loosening up in the studio is a recent development, their self-described repression has never permeated one defining element of the band. Though Wild Beasts have always written gleefully carnal lyrics, the *Boy King* persona and bolder instrumentation create an outsized conduit for brazen come-ons. Not many could pull off lines like "eat your heart out, Adonis," which Thorpe injects with white-hot fervor. "Our other albums before this were a way of circumnavigating the abyss, of saying, 'There's the darkness, let's just keep on this side of it,'" Thorpe says.

While embodying these songs might bring out his worst behavior, Thorpe and co. have arguably never been better, plunging into a world where desire and decay go hand in hand. "Decadence is where the *Boy King* exists, where there's this notion of responding to the id and getting what you want," Thorpe notes. "That kind of decadence, Marie Antoinette-style, it's a global phenomenon where we've shortened the difference between want and satiation."

For every thrillingly predatory moment, there's another of gorgeous vulnerability. *Boy King*'s preoccupation with power features album highlight "Alpha Female" paying tribute to strong women while deploying the most canonically masculine rock trope: a finger-tapping guitar solo from Fleming that he terms "ridiculous."

"In many ways, this record doesn't have any kind of political agenda except for personal crises," Thorpe describes. "Tom coined it as 'feminist cock rock.' It's using all these kind of phallic symbols to say something very subordinate."

Similarly, "Tough Guy" continues the band's years-long deconstruction of gender roles with an almighty snarl; Fleming cites Eddie Van Halen's iconic "Beat It" solo as a fresh challenge to his writing style.

"That high-wire act of control and abandon totally appeals to me," the guitarist says of *Boy King*'s embrace of shred and swagger. "That was one of the things I really enjoyed about working on this record, Hayden singing beautifully about his pain with a shitstorm happening behind him. Being caught between being really tasteful and controlled while appearing to be a rock-and-roll madman is just really funny. It's like drinking coconut water onstage in a Jack Daniel's bottle, it's all a swindle."

Having been together for well over a decade, Wild Beasts possess a rare self-awareness. After leaving their comfort zone, they've delivered an album that moves the mind as much as the body, inhabiting a space where reveling in baser instincts becomes revelatory. As Fleming concludes, "This record, we're demanding something different." ★

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(Left to r) Rostam and Hamilton Leithauser

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FIRST TAKERS

BY JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

The very first time Hamilton Leithauser met Rostam Batmanglij, he realized the two musicians had a special chemistry. For one, there was an easy familiarity between the duo, both of whom grew up in the Washington D.C. area in the '80s and '90s. Moreover, Leithauser was a huge fan of Batmanglij's group Vampire Weekend, and Batmanglij, likewise, an equally ardent fan of the Walkmen, the band Leithauser had fronted for the past decade-plus.

"It's funny how that worked out, because that never happens. We were a perfect match," says Leithauser during a recent interview to promote *I Had a Dream That You Were Mine*, his inaugural album with Batmanglij. The album, recorded over the course of two years of collaboration between the two, is an expansive collection of sounds and styles that somehow bears the signature sonic and lyrical landmarks of both the Walkman and Vampire Weekend.

The first time Batmanglij and Leithauser met, Leithauser was in the process of recording *Black Hours*, the debut solo album he released in 2014 after announcing, the previous year, that the Walkmen were going on an indefinite break. At one point, in the midst of discussing their favorite John Lennon and Bob Dylan records, Batmanglij asked Leithauser if he'd like to try working on a song he had been playing around with.

"He had a musical layout of some parts, and I had vocals and melody and word ideas, and some song construction ideas," says Leithauser. That song ended up becoming "1959," a starry-eyed lullaby with guest vocals from the Dirty Projectors' Angel Deradoorian that would wind up, several years later, concluding their joint debut album.

With its 1940s American songbook influences, "1959" represents just one of several genres that Leithauser and Batmanglij draw from on *I Had A Dream*. While lead single "A 1000 Times" quotes the main melodic hook from the '60s folk standard "500 Miles," other songs blend doo-wop, punk, crooning '50s pop, alt-country, and '80s new-wave. Leithauser is particularly pleased with the New Order-inspired synths Batmanglij subtly added to several tracks, something Leithauser had tried to do in the past with the Walkmen to no avail.

For both Batmanglij and Leithauser, their debut comes across as a liberating burst of influences and genres that neither songwriter could ever really find a way to channel in past creative outfits.

A large part of the album's sonic diversity comes from the duo's working process, in which distinct musical parts and mini-ideas ended up being stitched together to form single songs, resulting in a collection that contains meandering compositions like "In A Black Out," which begins with a delicate, nylon-string classical guitar fingerpicking melody and soon evolves into a rockabilly Johnny Cash riff.

"You have no idea if these things are even going to be on the same record together, but it's so unexpected that it's really exciting," says Leithauser.

During one early meeting, they began work on the *Black Hours* track "Alexandra," but after less than two hours Leithauser had to stop to catch a flight. "As I was boarding the plane, Rostam sent me a demo, and it was 99 percent what you hear on the record today."

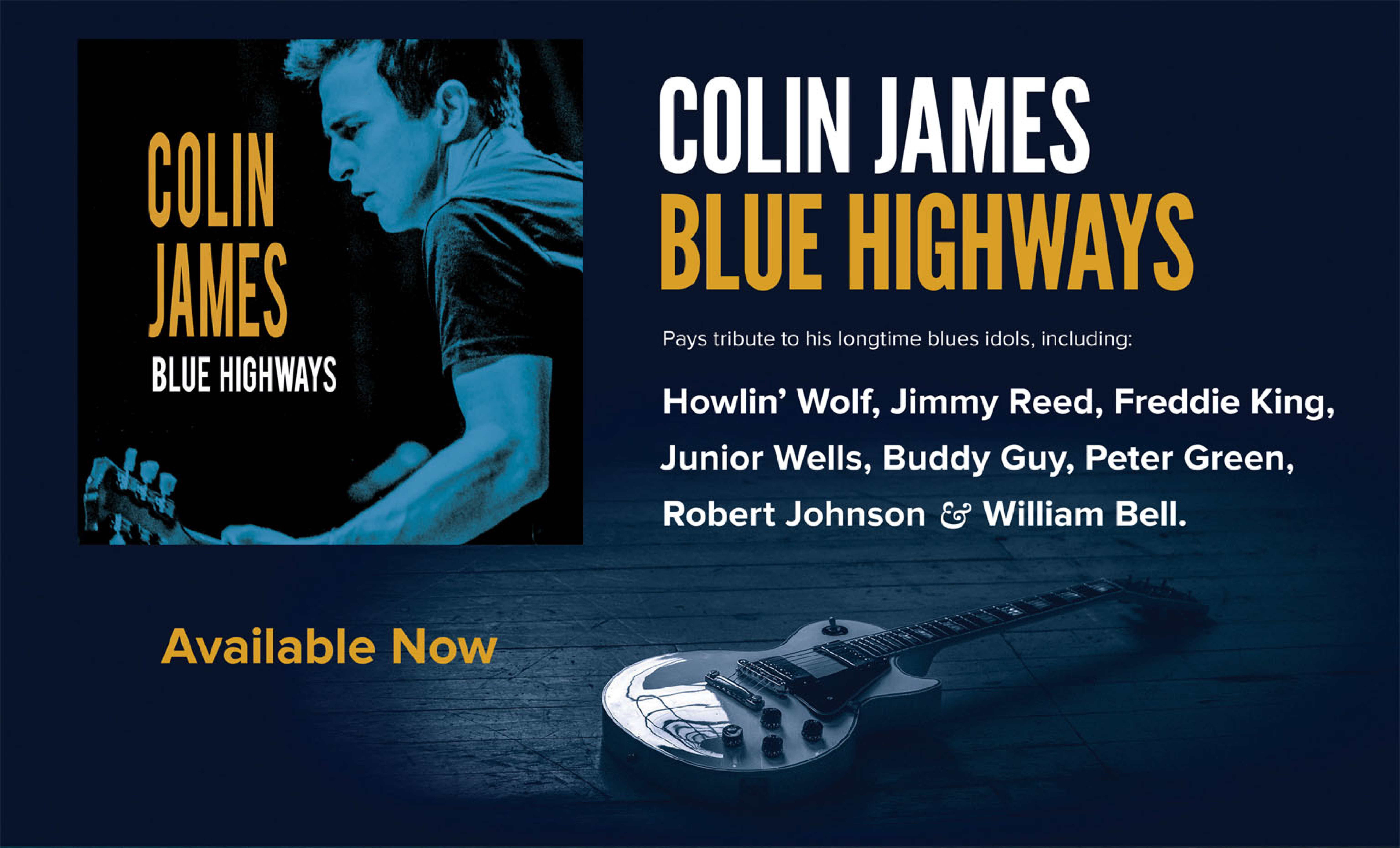
For the next two years, the duo would spend occasional five-day stretches of time at Batmanglij's studio in Los Angeles, informally working on ideas for songs with no specific project in mind. But before long, they had recorded upwards of 10 songs. "At that point," says Leithauser, "we decided to do a full-length record together."

The informality of the sessions also contributed to the free-flowing musical collages Batmanglij and Leithauser were intent on creating. Two primary influences Leithauser mentions when discussing the record are Johnny Cash's *At San Quentin*, an album he had owned since he was a teenager, and the eclectic soundtrack to the 1996 movie *Basquiat*.

Considering such disparate musical origins, Leithauser was surprised to hear a dominant consistency in voice and tone when he first listened to the album in full after it was completed. "There's a wandering, lost-soul feeling to the whole album," he says.

That sort of cohesion shouldn't come as a surprise to Leithauser, whose last several albums with the Walkmen were the result of extended, long-distance musical collaboration via email with various members of his band. Leithauser says that working with Batmanglij in large part felt similar to how he used to work with Walkmen instrumentalist Walter Martin, but what felt different this time was the intimacy and immediacy with which Leithauser and Batmanglij recorded their new material.

"With Rostam, him and I were writing right there in the studio, and a lot of the record was the first take. Even if we added stuff later, we'd be like, 'You know what, I liked that first take better.' That made the whole process so fun." ★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(Left to r) Inge Johansson, Laura Jane Grace, James Bowman, Atom Willard.

AGAINST ME!

REINVENTING THE WHEEL

BY SEAN L. MALONEY

"Any artist will say the same thing – the period of time between when you finish a project and when you release it is this limbo zone where life has no meaning, you're just waiting to see what happens."

It's a Thursday morning in September and Against Me! frontwoman Laura Jane Grace is on the phone with *American Songwriter*. *NPR* has just premiered its First Listen of *Shape Shift With Me* and Grace is thrilled that people are finally getting to hear it. There's "kid on Christmas morning" excitement in her voice. *Shape Shift With Me* marks a turning point for Grace, her first foray into love songs. It's a big thematic change after nearly two decades of creating punk rock's most poignant personal and political polemics.

But that's not the only thing in the "limbo zone" at the moment – Grace is also anticipating the release of her memoir *Tranny: Confessions Of Punk Rock's Most Infamous Anarchist Sellout* in November. A massive undertaking that culled almost a million and a half words of journal entries – a lifetime's worth of journal entries – down to a much more manageable 320 pages of in-the-moment observations, *Tranny* is Grace's first foray into the book world. Honest and unflinching, *Tranny* is the culmination of more than four years of work that began when Grace came out as a transgender woman in 2012.

"From the get-go of the trust-fall working with [co-writer] Dan [Ozzi] and my friend Mike, of just being like, 'Here, you can read all of my journals,' I couldn't be like, 'You can read that page, don't read that page, you can read those pages,'" Grace says. "They're friends [yet] they're essentially strangers, and at the same time, it's like, 'Read it, read it all.' From the start I kind of had to be detached from everything, have everything on the table, like, have *everything* on the table. And nothing's out of bounds."

While Grace's work has always peddled in raw emotion, her career is built on cathartic singalongs of complex observations about human behavior. Her piercing eye for detail and unapologetically intellectual approach to lyricism have brought the Florida native from the basements and living rooms of the DIY punk circuit to the big rooms and festival stages of the rock world. But Against Me!'s 2014 *Transgender Dysphoria Blues* upped the ante, tackling a taboo – and very personal – topic and transforming it into a concept album of rare and startling honesty.

In any other era, with any other band, a punk rock concept album about gender dysphoria could have been a disaster, a career destroyer. But *Blues* became a fan and critical favorite, an essential part of the Against Me! catalog and a record that felt important and historic from its very first spin. Rather than ostracize Grace, the music world embraced her. She had lost bandmates, a record label, and her marriage was falling apart. The arc of the universe was not bending in her direction and when she was in the pre-*Blues* limbo zone there was every reason to think that her big risk may not pay off. But it did, and would lead to new creative directions in the process.

"Going on tour in January 2014, we were in a place where I wasn't even sure if we were going to get to there, to be a band on tour again, as the future was pretty bleak for a while there," Grace explains. "That tour was such a good time and had such a good vibe, and being around everyone in the band and all the crew we had with us just brought me up, you know? And that momentum kept going.

"We were just having total fun and it continued for two years. And the status quo, my way of existence over those two years was going out, doing a tour and over that tour I would usually write a song or two … We would start out tours practicing, and I would be like, 'I've got a song I worked on last tour.' And we'd practice it and demo it, and when we got back from those two years we were like, 'We've got a new record.'"

The result, *Shape Shift With Me*, bristles with a vitality and energy that few bands can muster. The songs may be about romantic love but they are as tense and fraught with complications as anything that has come before. *Shape Shift* marks a new direction for the band but encapsulates everything that was ever great about them. Tracks like "333," "Delicate, Petite And Other Things I'll Never Be" and "Haunting Haunted Haunts" burn with melody and ferocity, pointing to a bright future for the band and its leader.

"We as a band have really experienced everything and I'm thankful for that … I've played Wembley, I've played Giant Stadium, I've played in front of hundreds of thousands of people," says Grace. "And I've played in basements and on street corners. I've been in bus accidents, been in van accidents, had friends die along the way, band members come and go. If you're going to have a long career it's going to happen." ★

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Photo by Danny Clinch

NORAH JONES

WHERE I LEAD ME

BRITTNEY McKENNA

Norah Jones is one of those artists whose reputations precede them. Like an actor from *Seinfeld* or an author of a bestselling series, Jones's persona as an artist is, to some corners of the listening public, forever tied to her earliest moments in the spotlight, namely "Come Away With Me," a massively popular hit from her debut album of the same name that, along with fellow *Come Away With Me* single "Don't Know Why," launched her career into the Starbucks-swilling stratosphere. That album, released in 2002 when Jones was only 23, has since sold 26 million copies worldwide, making it one of only a few dozen albums to earn RIAA's Diamond certification.

For those who have been following her career since, however, there's much more to the Brooklyn-born songwriter, now 37, than radio-ready crooners. A sampling of her catalog over the last 14 years shows an artist whose interests are as diverse as she is talented, with forays into country with bands the Little Willies and Puss n Boots; appearances on albums by artists like the Foo Fighters and Ryan Adams; several collaborations with *Family Guy* creator Seth McFarlane; and an Everly Brothers duets LP, titled *Foreverly*, with Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong, to name a handful.

Most recently, Jones released *Day Breaks*, her sixth solo studio album and a return, in many ways, to the jazz piano roots that first earned her such widespread acclaim. The Blue Note Records album sees Jones join forces with renowned jazz musicians Brian Blade (drums), Lonnie Smith (organ) and Wayne Shorter (saxophone) for nine original songs and three covers that venture past the pop-jazz of *Come Away With Me* and pay homage to genre greats like Duke Ellington and Horace Silver.

A cover of a Silver song, "Peace," features prominently on the album. It's striking when considered within today's political climate ("Peace is for everyone," the song intones), especially when placed alongside fellow *Day Breaks* track and Jones original "Flipside," an overtly political song that was inspired by the Les McCann/Eddie Harris classic "Compared To What." "The Horace Silver song, I had covered that song years ago," Jones says. "I put it on an EP that I put out, and I just thought, 'Well, this song seems appropriate right now.' I just kind of had the urge to sing those lyrics."

Jones is very much an inspiration-driven writer, which likely contributes to the breadth of musical styles found in her catalog. "What I've learned is that sitting down like it's a job every day and doing it doesn't necessarily work for me," she explains. "I've tried to do it that way. For me, when inspiration hits I just try to capture it somehow, whether it's on my iPhone recording or writing it down so that I don't forget it, because that's when it's magic, you know. It's inspiring and it just kind of comes out. You don't know where it comes from necessarily."

Day Breaks follows Jones's most recent solo album, 2012's *Little Broken Hearts*, a stellar collection produced by Danger Mouse that is perhaps her most drastic sonic departure to date. Relative to her other albums, *Little Broken Hearts* was not a huge commercial success and is her only full-length effort that hasn't been certified Platinum. Critics, however, spoke highly of the album, which sees Jones dabbling in more experimental arrangements and exploring darker lyrical themes, like a then-recent breakup. (The song "Miriam," a sparse, haunting standout from the album, contains lines like "You know you done me wrong/ I'm gonna smile when I take your life.")

That Jones would revisit her roots after such a shift is, then, not entirely surprising. She also attributes the decision to time spent back on the piano, her instrument of choice, while playing solo gigs over the last couple of years. "I don't know a ton of chords on the guitar," she laughs. "I'm pretty limited, so the songs tend towards more simple chords on the guitar. On the piano, I can play a little bit more. I could write a song like 'My Dear Country' from my third album [*Not Too Late*] or a song like [*Day Breaks* track] 'It's A Wonderful Time For Love,' with a lot of different chord changes that I just wouldn't be able to figure out on a guitar."

Day Breaks is, in many ways, a return to form for Jones, but she's still pushing herself forward, still following the preternatural musical intuition that brought her songs into the homes of millions of listeners back when her career first began. "For me, this is now a different thing," she says. "Some people might not have heard my last few records and might think I only play piano. I think it's fun for me to do whatever is inspiring me. I'll kind of always follow that no matter what it is, even if it's totally random." ★

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THE HANDSOME FAMILY

DARK MATTERS

BY STEPHEN DEUSNER

Photo by Jesse Littlebird

(Left to r) Brett and Rennie Sparks.

Rennie Sparks made up a new word when writing "Gentleman," a quirky period-piece song off the Handsome Family's latest album, *Unseen*. "From tempered glass I built the apparatus to alight the presence of *phantasmus*." "It's a Latinate version of phantasm," she explains. "If you created a scientific order of phantasms, it would be a *phantasmus*."

"I don't believe that's a word in any language," says Brett Sparks, her husband as well as the band's vocalist and arranger.

"It should be a word," she insists.

This is the way the duo work. Rennie drafts lyrics full of vivid and visceral imagery, fantastical scenes and oddball characters, while Brett sets them to music that is equally imaginative and sings them in a low, grainy, perfectly deadpan baritone. For 20 years now they've been traipsing the line between the real and the surreal, the everyday and the enigmatic, occasionally categorized as "alt-country" but more accurately described as true American originals. *Unseen*, the couple's 11th album, conjures a world where a word like *phantasmus* is not only a logical addition to the lexicon but nothing really out of the ordinary.

With its barrage of harpsichords and a chord progression that's more Bach than Buck Owens, "Gentlemen" is an inquiry into the supernatural, using William Crookes, a 19th-century scientist and spiritualist, to pinpoint the intersection between our world and some other, as-yet-unknown realm. Like all of their songs, it's imaginative and eccentric, even a bit funny, but also deadly serious: Rene Magritte by way of Grant Wood.

"It's a fascinating time in history," she says, "when science and the supernatural were still entwined. But we're so rigid now. You hear physicists talking all day long about dark matter, but they have no idea what it is."

"That's weirder to me," says Brett.

There is certainly an occult element to the music of the Handsome Family — not in the sense that there are men in black robes worshiping obscure demons (although there might be some), but more in the sense of evoking something important yet unnamable that lies just beyond our senses, some universal truth just outside the reach of our minds, some *phantasmus* floating in front of our third eye. On *Unseen* there are songs about miniature horses, melting casinos, woodland sirens, strange red doors, nagging emotions that haven't been named, and stories that never resolve in the expected ways, if they resolve at all.

"Art is supposed to make your world bigger, not smaller."

"Art is supposed to make your world bigger, not smaller," says Rennie. "People get uneasy with that feeling. It takes them into uncharted waters. They start having daydreams. They want it to be contained and it shouldn't be."

This squirrelly evasiveness occasionally causes consternation among listeners, who struggle to detect some concrete meaning when even the musicians aren't necessarily sure what the songs are about. "Right after *that song* hit, right after *that show* was popular, we got all these emails from people who wanted to know what the song means," says Brett. *That* song is "Far From Any Road," off their 2003 album *Singing Bones*, which was the opening-credits theme song for *that* show: HBO's *True Detective*. "One guy said, I've got a job. I've got kids. I don't have time to fuck around with this. I just want to know what the song is about!"

"So he could make it go away," says Rennie.

"It's not about anything. Or it is. Whatever. I don't know. Rennie wrote back and said the answer is fourteen."

"People think you're being facetious. Why would you bother spending a year writing and recording a song if you can sum it up in a sentence? Art shouldn't be reductive. It doesn't work that way."

Although Brett won't mention *that* song and *that* show by name, they did introduce the Sparks' strange musical concoctions to a much wider audience and in some weird ways informs the new album, particularly opener "Gold." A burglar lies on the ground behind a deserted Stop 'n' Shop, a bullet in his gut and the sun setting on the horizon. Around him float dollar bills. Nothing happens in the song; it's merely a scene, a visual postcard: time stopped for a minute so we can all look around at this tragedy.

"We have a lot of senseless crime in this town," says Rennie, referring to the couple's adopted hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico. "People get shot over nothing here. Two weeks ago somebody got stabbed in the neck over a game of beer pong. That game doesn't have to end that way."

The song is all mystery — not the kind that detectives solve, but the kind that listeners must ponder. "That's the beauty of songs," says Rennie. "You can take them apart for 100 years and you'll never get the essential explanation. The parts never add up to the whole. It will remain forever beyond understanding." ★

"We Had a Hit Single with Jesse McCartney, and it all Began with TAXI"

Andy Dodd and Adam Watts – TAXI members
www.reddecibelproductions.com www.adamwatts.com

Adam and Andy's success through TAXI is a little bit different from all the other stories you've probably heard. They got their *biggest* deal after their membership ran out!

Here's how it happened: "We joined TAXI in 2001 and found that it was a great motivator for us. We were members for two years. We learned a lot, wrote a ton of songs, and got a few film and TV placements -- some through TAXI, and some on our own.

We submitted a song we wrote with Jenn Shepard called "You Make Me Feel" to one of TAXI's Industry Listings. We didn't hear anything back for a while and eventually our TAXI membership ran out. Thankfully, we began to get so busy with production and writing gigs that we decided to wait and renew our membership at a later date.

Little did we know that TAXI had sent our song to a production/management company that was looking for material for a young, male Pop artist they were developing.

Later that year, Jesse McCartney's managers called us saying they had just heard "You Make Me Feel" on a CD they got from TAXI and wanted to have him cut the song. Although Jesse decided not to record "You Make Me Feel", his managers asked us to write more songs for him. We wrote a handful and they ended up putting his vocal on two of the tracks we produced, "Take Your Sweet Time" and "Beautiful Soul".

"Beautiful Soul" got played on Radio Disney, and Jesse's management got the song to a label executive at Disney. Soon after, Jesse was signed to Hollywood Records. "Beautiful Soul" became his first single, and we both signed publishing deals with Disney Music Publishing.

Jesse McCartney's album (entitled "Beautiful Soul") has gone Platinum in the U.S. and Australia.

"Beautiful Soul" went to #3 on Radio and Records CHR Pop Chart, #5 on Billboard's Top 40 Chart, #19 on Billboard's Adult Top 40 chart, it's a Platinum Digital Single Download, it's on the Gold-selling 'Cinderella Story' Motion Picture Soundtrack, the Gold-selling 'That's So Raven' TV Soundtrack, and the video was nominated for Best Pop Video at a 2005 MTV Video Music Awards."

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Setting Streaming Pay Rates For Songwriters Is No Easy Task

BY LYNNE MARGOLIS

In the not-too-distant past, countless talented songwriters earned comfortable livings without ever selling a record or performing a note in public. All they had to do was get those songs to someone else who might turn them into hits, thereby assuring a steady flow of "mailbox money."

It's no secret that the digital era swatted away that status quo like it was a bothersome fly. And the rise of on-demand, subscription-based streaming services such as Apple and Spotify has put a deep dent in royalties paid to songwriters.

The National Music Publishers Association and Nashville Songwriters Association International, two organizations involved in the Copyright Royalty Board's rate-setting review process, are trying to fix that dent. But they've been facing resistance from a formidable force: Sony Music Entertainment.

Unlike Universal Music Group and Warner Music Group, which have stepped away from negotiations to set 2018-to-2022 rates for mechanical, or non-performance, royalties for on-demand song streams, Sony has stayed involved — and has been pushing for a rate the two advocacy groups claim is even less than the current one. NMPA and NSAI say Sony should not even be in these negotiations, that only streaming services and songwriters – the parties affected – belong at the table.

The Sony umbrella includes Columbia, RCA, Epic, Arista Nashville and other labels representing some of the biggest artists of every genre, from Beyoncé, Barbra Streisand, Bob Dylan and Dolly Parton, to newer acts like First Aid Kit and Maren Morris. NSAI executive director Bart Herbison surmises that the only reason Sony had not dropped out by press time is because it may be planning to establish a competing streaming service. Sony and Universal recently launched NOW Music+, a low-cost streaming service playing hits from the *Now That's What I Call Music!* compilation album series, but for now, it serves only the United Kingdom.

The situation is complicated by the fact that Sony now wholly owns Sony/ATV Publishing, which means it could be negotiating against the interests of its own songwriters.

UNDER PRESSURE

Herbison and David Israelite, president and CEO of the Washington, D.C.-based NMPA, have taken their arguments public, via letters to Sony CEO Doug Morris and Sony artists, as well as coverage in music industry publications. Sony turned down interview requests, instead emailing the following statement:

"Record labels have participated in every rate proceeding for copyright royalty rates. We think it is important to be at the table since compositions form the foundation of our recordings and some of the world's greatest songwriters are signed with Sony Music as recording artists. Today's music marketplace requires that rates be both fair and sufficiently flexible so that all new models can thrive and create a healthy future for the overall music community and fans of music everywhere. That is why we proposed roughly a 15-percent increase in the statutory rate for on-demand streaming."

Herbison refuted this claim. "Sony says that they are offering us a pay raise for different things they call the headline rate, or the statutory rate. And it may *look* like a pay raise over the minimum, but we're getting more than the minimum from the biggest services. So it would be a pay decrease," he noted.

Israelite also responded to interview requests with an emailed statement: "We were surprised to see [the] Sony label challenge songwriters in the CRB; however, we are hopeful that through productive conversations they will do as all of the other majors and indies have done and settle with us. Withdrawing from the proceeding would put an end to the discord within the music community over this incredibly important issue and greatly benefit the songwriters they rely on."

If Sony fails to step back, Herbison said, the corporation will be sued.

By early October, the sides were talking. But Herbison said he could not predict

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Nashville Songwriters Association International Executive Director Bart Herbison pictured with songwriter Roger Cook and Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN) outside the U.S. Senate Chamber in Washington, D.C. Photo courtesy Bart Herbison

when, or if, a lawsuit-averting agreement might occur.

Meanwhile, as tensions continued to mount in September, one of the industry's most powerful players, producer T Bone Burnett, delivered the keynote speech at the Americana Music Association's conference in Nashville. "We live in a time in which artists are being stampeded from one bad deal to another worse deal," he said. "… Our work is being commoditized — the price of music is being driven down to zero."

THE NUMBERS GAME

To understand what's in play, one has to understand the labyrinthine world of royalty rates. Every five years, a three-judge panel sets mechanical royalty rates for songwriters. Subpart A of this payment structure deals with sales royalties on CDs, vinyl, downloads and ringtones.

The rate has been 9.1 cents for 12 to 15 years, Herbison said, adding, "We would like more; the record labels would like to pay us less. But at the end of the day, it wasn't worth fighting over and spending millions of dollars, so we all agreed to keep it at 9.1 cents. And that includes Sony. The digital services are not involved in that. That is money the record labels pay the songwriters.

"There's Subpart C, the futuristic stuff, like cloud lockers and some ways that songwriters could possibly be paid, but they're not currently. So there's nothing there, no issue.

"At issue is Subpart B: subscription services, where the customer pays X amount of dollars per month, and this is called interactive streaming. Pandora is not interactive streaming. You don't get to listen to the songs you want to listen to as many times as you want to listen to them. Interactive is Apple, Spotify, Rhapsody, etc. In those, there is both a performance royalty for songwriters and a mechanical portion.

"The price of music is being driven down to zero."

– T Bone Burnett

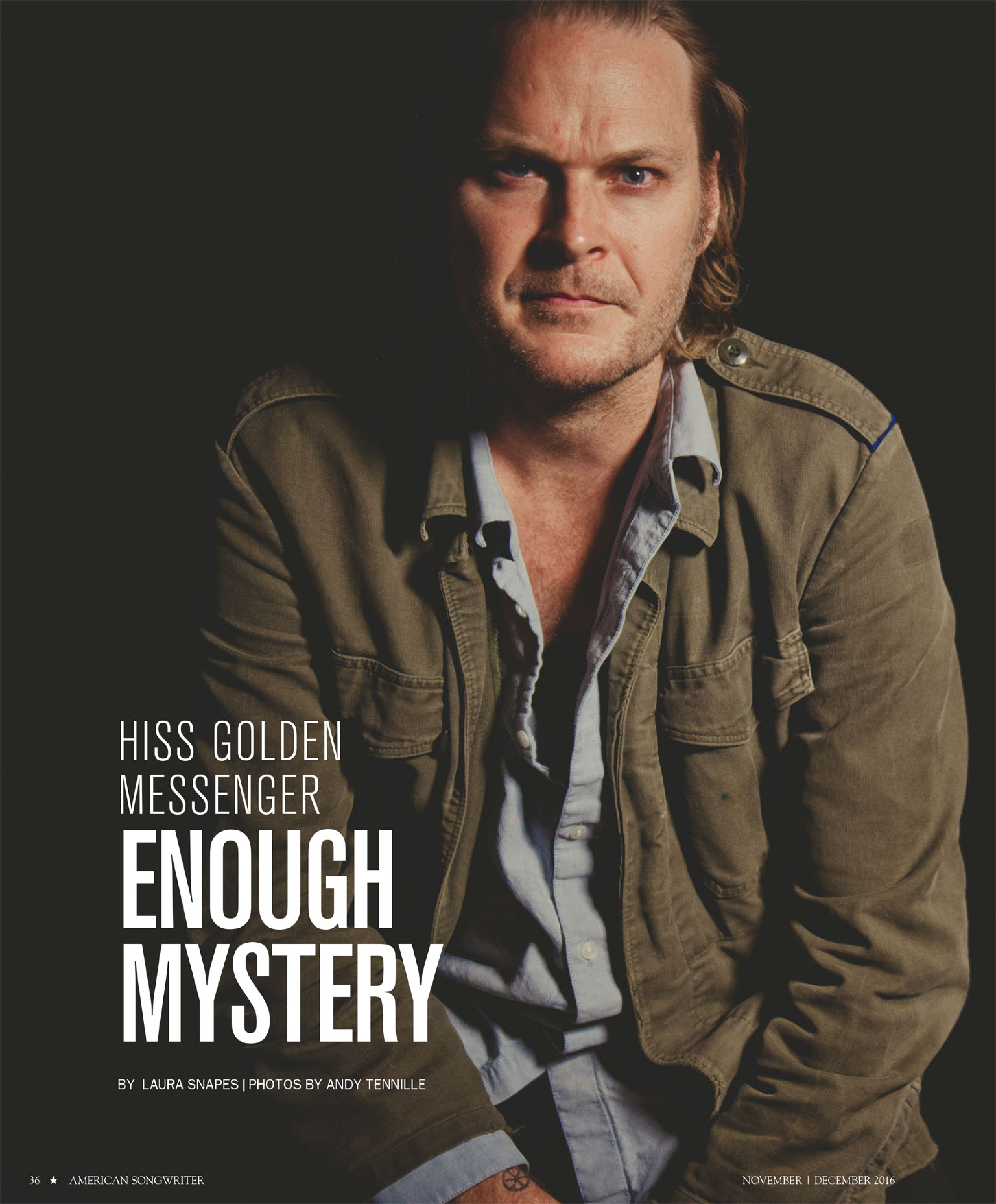
"Currently, songwriters receive the greater of three formulas: they either get a 50-cent minimum per customer, per month, divided by the number of times your song spins, or 10.5 percent of revenue — the subscription money from monthly fees and any ads that are run, or 21 percent of total content costs. What that means is what Apple or Spotify would pay for their content. That is something that ties us — if the record labels get an increase, then the songwriters get an increase, because it's the total content cost. It keeps the disparity on the mechanicals, on the sales side, down, which is why we differ on the streaming side. That's what's at issue."

He also referenced an industry-wide operating agreement called the one music principle. "If we pay each other directly, we're supposed to argue over that, because it's business," Herbison explained. "As in Subpart A, the record labels pay us directly. They're supposed to ask us to take less. We're supposed to ask for more. That is business. It's American commerce, and everybody understands that. When a third party pays us, like in Subpart B, we stay out of each other's business. The record labels don't pay us this money; it's the services and subscribers. This is the first time … since that principle evolved, that a record label has decided to insert themselves in Subpart B.

"They want to pay songwriters less so their streaming service can make more. And my comment would be, 'Really? With what the songwriters are already suffering? While the profession is essentially decimated? While we've lost 90 percent of the working songwriters who were making a living at this? Really? Sony, that's getting a reported $25 million a month in streaming royalties? Really?'"

The Recording Industry Association of America reports streaming subscription revenue for the first half of 2016 topped $1 billion for the first time, climbing 112 percent to $1.01 billion. By the end of June, streaming accounted for 47 percent of total U.S. recorded music revenue — by far the biggest chunk — according to the RIAA.

Herbison is quick to exempt Sony's Nashville executives from criticism, but added, "Look, you don't pile on somebody when they're down, and that's what they did. Sony stirred up the entire ecosystem, worldwide, of the music industry at a time when we need to be singing 'Kumbaya.'" ★



HISS GOLDEN MESSENGER

ENOUGH MYSTERY

BY LAURA SNAPES | PHOTOS BY ANDY TENNILLE

IN JANUARY 2015, AS STORM JUNO BATTERED THE EAST COAST, MC Taylor was spinning out in a Washington D.C. hotel room. His band, Hiss Golden Messenger, was supporting the easygoing British songwriter Ben Howard on a tour that wasn't necessarily a perfect fit to start off with. The inclement weather had knocked out their next show — and their next fee — which compounded Taylor's guilt over leaving his young family behind to hit the road again, having quit his job as a state folklorist following the success of Hiss' fifth album, *Lateness Of Dancers*.

To stave off the spiral, he started to write, and would later come up with the line that would light the path to his next record: "I was a dreamer, babe, when I set out on the road/ But did I say I could find my way home?" *Heart Like A Levee*, Hiss' second album for Merge Records, is partially about the push and pull between home and tour. "There can be a little bit of collateral damage when you're trying to chase your dreams, even if you're trying for there not to be," Taylor says, calling from his Durham, North Carolina home a couple days before his 41st birthday. "And it's easy to go out and get lost, and having a hard time getting back to where you were."

As Hiss Golden Messenger, Taylor strikes a rare equilibrium in his songwriting. He establishes the difficulties of domesticity without denying the enduring love that makes these things worth fighting for, and respects the transcendent possibilities of music-making while remaining steadfastly grounded. It wouldn't be in his nature to make a straightforward record about the difficulties of life on tour, even though it's a common concern for him and his bandmates, all of them fathers. "I think traveling brought it on a little bit," he says of his fleeting crisis, "but I'm also the kind of person that can get lost in his own mind. I'm sort of an internal person and can get lost inside myself, even in a room full of people."

On *Heart Like A Levee*'s opening song, "Biloxi," Taylor writes from the hubbub of his oldest kid's sixth birthday party. "It's hard, Lord/ Lord it's hard," runs the refrain, less of a lament than a collective sigh over the reality of balancing everyone's individual needs. "Everybody in the whole damn place has gotta have a good time," he sings — which can be a challenge when you're of a solitary disposition, as he is: "All around my old hometown I was known as a loner/ You know I wasn't lonely, I just liked being alone." Yet Taylor's band — Megafaun's Phil and Brad Cook, and Matt McCaughan — counterbalance his existential queries with joyful music, a soft, rollicking crest that shimmies like a field of corn stalks in the breeze.

"This has been a constant, I feel like, on Hiss records," Taylor explains of his major chord MO. "Trying to make it happy and sad at the same time. That's really the easiest way to say it. Figuring out a way to maintain that sort of sadness that is — I don't know how to describe it, really. That is what life feels like for me, you know what I mean? There's a lot of great things and a lot of hard stuff. And I want my music to exist in that whole world that seems real to me. And I'm drawn toward music that does that too. It just is powerful to me."

A total openness underpins both the lyrical and musical sides of the record. *Heart Like A Levee* beams with welcoming Southern hospitality, but it's also startlingly frank — the kind of honesty that can only ever be the product of unyielding trust. He's a "rambling rake with a heart of obsidian" on the title track, where he frets, heartbreakingly, "Will you grieve me, honey? Did I give you a reason to try?" The seething "Like A Mirror Loves A Hammer" feels like Taylor's attempt to chop off a limb to free everyone from his predicament, pleading with his loved ones to "build a wall I cannot climb/ Fix a lock I cannot break." The weight of guilt bears down on the forlorn gospel of "Happy Day (Sister My Sister)," as he wonders whether he can carry "all of the grace, and all of the sorrow," but then confronts the relative privilege of his position: "Should I wade in that river? With so many people living just/ Just above the waterline?"

"When I really sit and look at these words, I can see that I'm writing about communication," says Taylor, who says he sees the tension between family and work as "a fair trade, you know, to be able to have a catalogue of records that are really good documents of where my mind was at during a particular year or time, and having it be something I can give to my friends and family if they're interested — that's a pretty big deal for me."

After years of failing to make it as a musician, first in '90s hardcore band Ex Ignota, then in early 2000s folk rock act the Court and Spark, 2010's ashen, devastating *Bad Debt* was Taylor's revelation. He wrote it during sleepless nights back when his son was a newborn, with

zero expectations, only for it to go on and strike a wider chord. (He's aware that to this day, it's still many fans' favorite Hiss album.) It taught him that "the value in making a record was just for myself being able to exorcise some demons, or have a form to talk about things that were on my mind," he says. "And I feel like if I can do that in a genuine, straightforward manner that resonates with me emotionally, it's a success."

Taylor has considered how the wider audience expectations surrounding Hiss' sixth record may have affected its writing, actively welcoming "as many people as are willing" to engage with his music, while acknowledging the danger that he elucidates in "Cracked Windshield": "A song is just a feeling when you make it pay the rent/ Next thing you know you're saying something you'd never say." That hasn't necessarily happened, though he's not immune to the possibility.

"I would be hard pressed to probably find a recording of myself where there was not some kernel of something in there that I recognized as real," he says. "But that doesn't mean that I haven't thought, maybe I should do it this way, maybe people will respond if we arrange it like this. That always happens — to everybody, I think." There is some complication about making a living at this, he says, "but I'm pretty sensitive about how I use music in my life. I feel like it has to do something very particular for me. And that's how I want my music to feel, too."

That particular quality is an "emotional commitment," he continues. "It's hard to explain what exactly that thing is, scientifically, but it's definitely something that people recognize. It's something that compels me towards music, I'll put it that way. And so I feel like knowing that music like that exists in the world, I want to be part of that river." (Taylor's social media feeds plot this river with alacrity, constantly sharing heartfelt recommendations for everything from Traffic's *The Low Spark Of High Heeled Boys* to Bunny Wailer's *Blackheart Man*, and Augie Meyers' *Western Head Music Co.*) "You can feel when a musician or artist is making music that's very self-conscious, and that's not really what I respond to," he adds. "I don't generally think of that as being a pathway towards a sort of timeless vibe. There's music that feels very self-conscious, and I really would love to stay out of my own way with my own music."

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Heart Like A Levee didn't even necessarily start out as the sixth Hiss Golden Messenger record. In 2015, Durham's Duke University approached Taylor about participating in one of their Performances From the Archives, a program that pairs artists with historic resources from their Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Taylor was presented with the late American photographer William Gedney's portraits of a family at the Blue Diamond Mining Camp in Leatherwood, Kentucky, from 1972, and agreed to work with them. "I spent a lot of time with the photographs, and sort of tried to write towards them, but it wasn't really working. So I put the photos away and wrote about my feelings, both as we traveled around and while I was at home."

He would periodically check back in with the photos, keeping them pinned to his writing wall, and found himself drawn particularly to the monochrome image of a young boy that now appears on *Heart Like A Levee*'s cover, clutching his shoulders and staring deep into Gedney's camera. "His expression and his eyes are so right on the money of emotion that I feel very powerfully toward," he says. "There's a sort of challenging feeling and then a very vulnerable feeling that coexist in his expression that I'm really drawn to. So the emotions that appeared in the pictures, I was kinda hearing them in the songs on this record. It's a weird relationship, but one that was really fruitful."

Taylor performed the songs at Duke in October 2015, and soon after entered a local studio in Durham to record the album, jettisoning the immersive barn-tracking experience of *Lateness Of Dancers*. "I wanted the recording process to be straightforward and sort of fun and impulsive, but I didn't want to take a really long time to do it," he explains. "I still feel like there's some value in trying to make a record quickly." Taylor and Brad Cook undertook extensive pre-production ("There's pretty much a home-recorded version that I could conceivably put together," he says), and laid down the basic tracks live in the studio. "Then I started having people come over and add little parts," he says, praising his core collaborators, and guests Alexandra Sauser-Monnig, Tift Merritt, Michael Lewis, Matt Douglas, Chris Boerner, Josh Kaufman, Ryan Gustafson, Sonyia Turner, and Jon Ashley.

Already, Taylor considers *Heart Like A Levee* to be his best album. "I think the way that we captured everybody in the room playing is pretty special," he says. "It feels like we hit a lot of sweet moments together, which is important to me because the people that I play with — I love them. Having this as a reminder of something we all did together is great. I like the way that it sounds, the way that it's sequenced — which was not terribly deeply thought out, but rolls in a really powerful way. And there's a certain set of things that I'm thinking about with this record that really are still with me. And I feel like I was able to articulate them well this time."

Hiss' records have often articulated a search for spirituality: not God, precisely, but some kind of guiding, transcendent spirit. Both the wordless crescendo of "Ace Of Cups Hung Low Band" and the final lines of the gently swinging "Highland Grace" feel as close as he's ever come to finding a resolution in that regard, locating a faith that doesn't depend on physical proof:

And if you can't buy it and you stand and deny it
And if you can't see it and you refuse to believe it
And if you can't count it but you can't help but doubt it
But loving her was easy,
the easiest thing in the world.

"That theme is definitely present on this album, this kind of reckoning with spirituality," he says. "There's family of course; there's wandering and trying to come back home, and kind of dealing with the way that we change when we leave and re-entering when you get back home — that's a real thing." But for Taylor, part of what he considers to be articulating his thoughts well relies on a lack of specificity. "I feel like there's enough mystery on this record for me to live with for a while. There's a lot of question marks here, in a good way — there are a lot of holes for me to go down when I think about these songs, and I have to have that, places to explore certain ideas."

Often that means writing, and leaving in things that he doesn't quite understand at the time. "Like maybe I think I'm not articulating it quite right, or it's a little opaque, but the more I sing it the more I get what my subconscious was trying to say," he expands. "I think that's what I want my relationship with my music to be like, even though it's hard. You can't program that, but I feel like you have to invite it in when you sense that it might be around. I wanna grow with these songs, and I think part of it is not knowing them fully. There are other songwriters that know every syllable of their songs exactly, and that's also cool, but that's not what I'm doing, really." ★

DOLLY PARTON

American Hustler

SHE'S THE MOST DECORATED FEMALE SINGER IN THE HISTORY OF COUNTRY MUSIC. AND SHE HAS NO PLANS OF SLOWING DOWN.

BY BRITTNEY McKENNA | PHOTOS BY FRAN STRINE

DOLLY PARTON IS SMILING. She's sitting in her manager's office, housed in a nondescript building just west of downtown Nashville, legs folded beneath her, hands clasped, displaying a near Zen-like confidence rivaled only by the preternatural warmth she exudes.

She's a couple of hours into a long day of interviews promoting *Pure & Simple*, her 43rd studio album, which was released in August of this year. Just half an hour earlier, she wrapped up a series of on-camera interviews with some of country music's brightest young female stars, including Kelsea Ballerini, Cam, RaeLynn and Lauren Alaina. Each artist joined Parton on a soundstage fitted with an impressively detailed replica of a Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, their conversations taking place on the faux storefront's front porch. These conversations could easily have been torch-passings, a pillar of country's old guard offering her blessings to the genre's most promising young talents. Instead, they read as heart-to-hearts that just happened to be caught on camera, Parton as interested in RaeLynn's stories of breaking into the business as the 22-year-old singer-songwriter is in awe of the legend seated next to her. For Parton, there is no more important conversation than the one she's having right now. There is no more important person than the one seated next to her. There is no more important task than the one she's currently completing.

And that's saying a lot, as Parton has a résumé that would make even the most ambitious among us shudder. She's one of the most decorated country singers in the history of the genre, earning 10 CMA Awards and 42 nominations; eight Grammy awards and 46 nominations; a 1984 star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame; and an induction, in 1999, into the Country Music Hall of Fame. She received the National Medal of Arts from President George W. Bush in 2005 and the Kennedy Center Honors the following year. She's had 25 releases certified at least Gold, charted 26 number one country songs and sold more than 100 million albums worldwide. She's an actress, an author, a humanitarian, a producer, a theme park mogul, and as astute a businesswoman as you're ever going to find. She's an icon, a living legend, American royalty.

What's most striking about Parton, though, is also the subject of her latest album: her capacity for love. Of all her talents, she may be best at loving, whether the objects of her love are her fans, her family members, her friends, her peers, her business ventures, or, of course, her songs. *Pure & Simple* is all about love in its various incarnations, from that butterflies-in-your-stomach kind of love brought about by a new romance ("I'm Sixteen") to, well, the cheatin' kind ("Can't Be That Wrong"). It's one of her most personal collections and, appropriately, earned Parton her first number one country album since 1991's *Eagle When She Flies*, an accomplishment that wasn't lost on the 70-year-old artist who, despite being a household name, hasn't had heavy radio play in years.

"I've been very excited about that, especially after all these years in the business," Parton says of *Pure & Simple*'s chart success. "I wasn't really expecting it. But I'm happy about it. It's always good to be number one, for any reason. But it feels good to be number one, especially when the music's concerned, especially when it's a personal album like this that I have written and produced and arranged."

The inspirations fore *Pure & Simple* were twofold. First, Parton and her team were plotting a tour — her first major U.S. tour in 25 years ("I didn't think about touring here to any big degree, except for special shows," she explains. "I'm glad to know they still like me after all these years.") — that would take an aesthetic departure from the singer's flashy persona: stripped down, "pure and simple." If she was going to tour, though, Parton wanted to give the fans who bought tickets some new music to go along with the price of admission.

"Then I thought, 'Well, what would be pure and simple? It should be a love song,'" she says. "Then I wrote [title track 'Pure & Simple'], and I thought, well, I've been married 50 years this

year — my husband and I had just renewed our vows — and this would be a good time to just write a whole album of love songs."

Parton met her husband, Carl Dean, at Nashville's Wishy-Washy Laundromat in 1964, when the would-be star was only 18. They married two years later and have been together ever since, renewing their vows earlier this year in celebration of their 50th anniversary.

"We got married at our little chapel at the house and we got in our camper and went down that night and spent the night in Ringgold, Georgia, where we [first] got married," Parton says of her recent vow renewal ceremony. "We just got food and we stayed in our little camper and we had our little anniversary fast food dinner there, which is kind of what we did before, but we were in the car."

Several of the songs on *Pure & Simple* were inspired by Parton's marriage to Dean, including the album's closing track "Forever Love," which she says the couple considers to be their wedding song. She pulled other tracks like "Tomorrow Is Forever" and "Say Forever You'll Be Mine" from her vast catalog of unreleased and unrecorded songs.

"Everything in there plays off relationships of mine," she says. "Some of the songs are from mine and Carl's early days in our marriage. I pulled a couple of songs from the '70s, 'Tomorrow's Forever' and 'Say Forever You'll Be Mine,' those are songs I wrote when our marriage was new."

There are a couple of tunes, though, that don't pull directly from Parton's life, instead finding inspiration in the romantic trials and tribulations of her close friends and family members, like "Can't Be That Wrong" and "I'm Sixteen."

"I think ['Can't Be That Wrong'] is the ultimate cheating song," she exclaims. "'Anything that feels this right can't be that wrong.' I based that on someone's relationship that's very close to me, someone that was very in love with their family, but they fell in love with somebody else and that was just as real to them, and they could not give either up. I saw how they were suffering with that whole thing and it would hurt me because I knew that person so well. I thought, 'Wow, I know this is real. This is major, to go through this.' My favorite line as a songwriter is the tag on that song, 'Well to hell with heaven if it means I lose you.' I thought, 'Yes! That's one of the best lines I ever wrote!'"

"I'm Sixteen" is a more lighthearted take on romance, and Parton says it's her favorite on the album. She was inspired to write the song, a playful jaunt that features lines like "You love me, and what could be more rejuvenating? I'm young again" after witnessing her sister find a late-in-life romance that had her grinning like a teenager. "I'm going to send that to AARP!" she laughs. "I think that would be the perfect song for them."

It's a fun song, sure, but in an industry dominated by youthful portrayals of romance (often from the perspectives of male artists), it feels — despite its happy-go-lucky melody — subversive. The song is one of several on the album that celebrates love at any age, reminding listeners that it's not just hot young twenty-somethings who, as tongue-in-cheek single "Outside Your Door" suggests, "just can't keep [their] minds and [their] hands" off one another.

"You never feel old," Parton says. "And I know that I'm old, but you never feel old. You never change inside. Your body changes, and certain things change, but that's why you see people in old-age homes, nursing homes, falling in love with somebody. You're always like a child. At all ages, we feel exactly the same. I remember my first little boyfriend from when I was just a kid. And I'm married [now], but I ain't dead and I ain't blind, so you still see people that move you and you get your little flirtatious things going. That keeps you alive and keeps you going."

"I'd still be doing it today if I was a waitress. That's how much I love the music."

"I'm Sixteen" isn't Parton's only progressive take on love. She's long been an outspoken advocate of LGBT rights, a rarity in a genre long dominated by conservatism. In an interview with PrideSource.com earlier this year, Parton shared that she had served as a confidante to a number of gay and lesbian family members and friends over the years. She also voiced her support for the transgender community ("I have a couple of transgender people in my company who are on salary with me, so I am totally open for that."). "I have a huge gay and lesbian following, and I'm proud of 'em, I love 'em, and I think everybody should be themselves and be allowed to be themselves whoever they are, whatever they are," she tells PrideSource.

Parton's openness to love in all its forms has no doubt played a role in the longevity of her own marriage. She also attributes their lasting connection to their mutual respect for freedom and their own senses of self. "A lot of people ask me about how we made it so long," she says. "I really do think that there's a lot to be said about respect and trust, that you're going to trust that that person is always going to be there. Freedom has been great for us, to have the freedom to be who we are, and the freedom to love each other the way we do."

Compared to Parton's ubiquity, Dean's public persona is almost nonexistent, his quiet privacy the yin to Parton's rhinestone-studded yang. It's clear that when it comes to her career, she's steering the ship, with Dean happily along for the ride.

"I like to wait until they get it packaged to give him the record," she says of her husband. "I'll play it for him, then he can take it home and listen if he wants to. He's not my biggest fan. He is as a person, but musically I have to sit him down. I don't just sing him every song I write. Singers like to do that. In the early days when I wanted him to listen he said, 'I ain't got time to listen to every song you write. That's all I'd ever get done, as much as you write.' So I just do it on special occasions, like if he listens to an album."

Another love of Parton's that hasn't diminished with time is her love for songwriting and for performing. Forty-three albums later and she sounds, both on her album and in conversation, as excited as ever to share new music with her fans.

"I love it as much as I ever did," she says. "It's easy for me to write. I've never been one of those writers that had writer's block, mostly because I never worried about that. I never wrote for a living. I never wrote for money. I never sang for money. I wanted to be rich and I wanted to do things, I wanted to be successful. But that was not what motivated me. My music was what drove me. I'd still be doing it today if I was a waitress. I'd still be spending any money I could to do demos of my songs and still be making records and selling them out of the trunk of my car if I had to, that's how much I love the music."

At times, Parton sounds like she still experiences the occasional feeling of surprise when considering her unprecedented success as an entertainer and a businesswoman. Born the fourth of 12 children to poor parents in east Tennessee, Parton has never forgotten her humble roots, as seen in classic songs like "Coat Of Many Colors" and its 2015 TV movie adaptation, which memorializes the coat her mother made for her when she was a young child.

"I think that because I've had to do so many different things, my writing has developed. I can write bigger," she explains. "But I can also, because of who I am and who I've stayed, all I have to do is go back and write those country mountain songs. I picture Mama and Daddy, and I can pull it right together from my memories. I can be right there in that little cabin, in that little area and feel those feelings. It's easy for me to write those, easier than anything, really."

The *Coat Of Many Colors* film is the first of several collaborations between Parton and NBC. The second, *Dolly Parton's Christmas Of Many Colors: Circle Of Love*, debuts this fall and provides greater insight into her meager beginnings.

"It's all about the year that we all pitched in enough money to buy a wedding ring for Mama," she says. "She'd never had a ring, having so many kids and no money. So that's one of the storylines in the movie. Then the other is a Christmas miracle that happens when we almost froze to death in a blizzard up there in a holler in the Smoky Mountains. So it really has a lot of colors, a lot of love, forgiveness, acceptance and miracles and fun and music.

"The song 'Coat Of Many Colors' tells a good story and we covered it all, I think, in the movie. But as far as being able to expand on those ideas and visually see all of that come together, I think people really love seeing that done. I know I do."

As if a new album and new TV movie (which Parton herself appears in, as the "Town Tramp" from whom she adopted her signature makeup, hair and wardrobe) weren't enough for one year, Parton also, along with Emmylou Harris and Linda Rondstadt, rereleased their Trio catalog in the form of *The Complete Trio Collection*. The collection features both 1987's *Trio* and 1999's *Trio II*, as well as a number of previously unreleased songs.

"We realized we still had about 20 songs left," Parton says of the *Trio* reissue. "We're not getting any younger. Well, they're not getting any younger. I'm not getting any older. But seriously, Linda has Parkinson's disease now, and she's not able to sing anymore. I don't know if it had to do with the fact that we would love to see that out while we're still young enough to enjoy it ourselves, to see that come to be while we're still around to enjoy it."

She's also featured on the soundtrack for the blockbuster summer Netflix series *Stranger Things*, her song "The Bargain Store," off her 1975 album of the same name, the only country song to make the cut on an otherwise '80s pop and rock leaning collection. Upon hearing that was the song the series chose, Parton laughed, explaining, "You know, back in the day everybody thought it was too risqué, but I didn't think about it being risqué when I wrote it. I just thought it was about somebody putting their life back together. They thought it was too suggestive, like 'the bargain store is open, *come inside*.' I guess they thought come inside meant *COME INSIDE*. I just meant come inside my life, inside my heart and help me put the pieces back together. Oh, I've been through that a lot in the old days. Well, it's a new day and age now. You can say anything."

She also scored her 26th number one song with "Forever Country," a medley spearheaded by the Country Music Association that prominently features her classic song "I Will Always Love You" alongside John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads" and Willie Nelson's "On The Road Again." The video for the medley, which is a veritable who's-who of contemporary country music, closes with Parton standing alone in a field, bathed in sunlight, a slight smile on her face as she sings the song's final lines. It's a startling image, and a fitting one. After all, the very first CMA Awards ceremony took place in 1967, the same year Parton made her debut. It doesn't seem like a stretch to say that the neither the CMA nor country music itself would be the same today without her considerable influence.

That influence wasn't born overnight, but rather was the result of 50-plus years of hard work, a little luck and a whole lot of love. It should come as little surprise, then, that even after all that time, Parton is as relevant as ever, still sound-tracking our biggest cultural moments and still adding to her superhuman collection of accolades. It's why, too, those younger artists, as with so many aspiring young women around the world, look to Parton for guidance, particularly in a country music climate that, despite no shortage of female talent, favors men singing about denim-clad caricatures of women over providing real women with storytelling platforms of their own.

"You just need to keep your mind on your business and be true to yourself and know what your strengths and what your weaknesses are and try to strengthen your weaknesses and make your strengths stronger," Parton says. "Those were some interesting girls today. I appreciated the admiration and respect. You don't know what you're going to mean to people when you're starting out, but thinking that I have been an inspiration and some sort of guidepost in some ways as a woman makes me feel proud."

As the interview concludes, Parton hops up out of her chair, still smiling. She's gracious and appreciative, cracking jokes at every turn. Her manager offers her a 10-minute break before the next round of interviews begins, but she declines. She wants to keep going and make the most of her time. For the woman who's done everything, everything simply is not enough.

"There's all kinds of things I still want to do," she says. "I still want to have a line of cosmetics, a line of wigs and a line of clothing. If I live long enough, I'll see them done. And if not, there's still projects that could be done without me. But I'm still working on getting those things done. I want to continue to write, to do more movies, and I'm still working on a Broadway musical of my life story. So I've still got lots of stuff to do and little time to do it in, so I have to hustle."

Parton's legacy, which will no doubt continue to grow in scope, is a complex one. It's the legacy of a virtuosic writer, an unparalleled businesswoman, a dedicated wife, a skilled performer, a loyal friend, a generous humanitarian. It's a roadmap for artistic young women and a source of comfort for those who don't yet feel at home in their colorful coats. Most of all, though, it's a legacy of love. Pure, simple love. ★

LIVE FROM AMERICAN SONGWRITER

MARLON WILLIAMS
EXCLUSIVE SESSION

AMANDA SHIRES
EXCLUSIVE SESSION

FEATURING
JASON ISBELL

On Repeat

WARPAINT

BY KATIE CHOW
PHOTO BY MIA KIRBY

(Left to r) Jenny Lee Lindberg, Stella Mozgawa, Emily Kokal, Theresa Wayman

THE CENTERPIECE OF WARPAINT'S self-titled 2013 album is the appropriately-titled "Disco//Very," a muscular, menacing track that turns the line "I need to take a break!" into a battle cry. As the quartet readies its successor, it becomes clear that this was a prescient moment.

Heads Up follows a record that had its own mythology built into it. Composed on a retreat to Joshua Tree and produced by Flood (Depeche Mode, Nine Inch Nails, PJ Harvey), it resulted from the kind of lofty process that many artists only dream of.

"The big thing about that album was that it was written at this time and place in the desert where we were alone with each other," singer and guitarist Emily Kokal says. "We incubated it out of this kind of experience because we removed ourselves from our daily lives, which was kind of the point."

The story behind *Heads Up* is less glamorous on paper, but it emerges from the band's exponential maturation in musicianship. While last time Warpaint headed to London to record, Kokal, along with singer/guitarist Theresa Wayman, singer/bassist Jenny Lee Lindberg, and singer/drummer Stella Mozgawa, turned their downtown Los Angeles practice space into a full-fledged studio. They also looked to their other existing resources, building from songs they had written alone or with portions of the group, rather than constantly working as a full band.

"That probably cut a year off what we normally would have taken if we had started from scratch, writing from nothing, with each other," Kokal says. "That ended up being a really fun, freeing process for us since we'd been working like that since 2004, some configuration where to work, we had to all be in the room together."

Expanding on the sinuous grayscale psychedelia that defines their sound, *Heads Up* features some of Warpaint's boldest, poppiest material yet.

"When we start from scratch together, we write songs that are a real journey, we don't write verse chorus verse, we go ABCDEFG," Kokal describes. "There's not a lot of repetition, it's like, now we've done this part, let's make something new. That's always been a unique part of our sound, this unconventional journey of a song. But when we worked more off demos and more out of the box, we were playing around more with more traditional songwriting styles. It was a good exercise for us, because there's a reason why those formulas have carried on as the tradition of songwriting. They're like mathematical formulas you plug your own creative ideas into and see what you can do within that limitation."

Building from what "Disco//Very" had hinted at, *Heads Up* highlights "New Song" and "So Good" flirt with funk, translating dancefloor-ready rhythms into the eerie, underwater zone that Warpaint operate within.

"That can be liberating as well, just to find a really good groove and find the perfect lyrics that form on top of that," Kokal says. "Something you could listen to forever."

Not only did they build their own studio to make *Heads Up*, but they changed their production style to channel their new growth.

"The album is a lot more palpable, there's presence," says Kokal. "There's not a ton of reverb on our vocals. For a long time, we had kind of a faraway sound recorded, but we have a very immediate sound live. Part of the desire with this album was to have a nod to how we are live."

The band brought back a familiar face behind the desk: Jacob Bercovici, who produced their 2009 debut EP *Exquisite Corpse*.

Warpaint has always been a testament to the power of chemistry between performers.

"He's an amazing musician, he's got an incredible ear and he's just such a good friend that you can be yourself around him," describes Kokal. "You can have a freakout, you can get in an argument, it's not a big deal. That was a really important part of it, we just wanted to be able to express ourselves. We needed to be able to have our relationships with each other. He knows us all and how we interact with each other."

Indeed, Warpaint has always been a testament to the power of chemistry between performers. There's an unmistakable thread bonding the four women together that's rarely matched in other bands. That doesn't make them immune to the wear and tear of the road.

"We're basically going through life together at this point, and I've been hanging out with Theresa since I was 11 on a regular basis," Kokal says. "We are sharing this time of our lives together, and sometimes it's really intense and the road is really hard and it strains the relationships, but ultimately there's a gratitude and an appreciation and a celebration of what we do."

After ending the tour in 2015, the band made plans to immediately hit the studio, feeling the pressure to deliver a follow-up album. However, more than two years of traveling had taken their toll, and Kokal had to speak up.

"When we got off tour, I didn't even want to make music for a second," she recalls. "I was just not feeling inspired. When we were rushing to the studio to make another album, I was like, 'I can't do that, I actually need to not be anybody for a couple months.'"

It became clear to the others as well that they needed some time apart. Lindberg released her debut solo album *right on!* during the intermission; Wayman also set off on her own and formed the New Wave-leaning group BOSS. A veteran session drummer, Mozgawa took on a variety of other collaborations, including lending a hand to electro-psych trio Jagwar Ma, friends from her native Australia.

"I just needed to give myself quiet time and space to be inspired and to have a playful relationship to playing music," says Kokal, who started refining her technical skills after a couple months off.

Accustomed to demoing rough sketches on guitar or piano, she learned how to use Ableton to make fuller-fledged songs on her own. Whereas her bandmates' experience with home recording translated easily to the studio, Kokal previously found herself more reliant on Flood's expertise. This time around, she was determined to step it up.

"As a democratic band, you as an individual want to get your best work out there so you feel like you're satisfying yourself creatively," she says. "But it's also about the whole, it's about the songs. Sometimes it's about underplaying to let something else speak up and allowing that to be satisfying to yourself creatively because you're serving the whole."

With new abilities and a recharged energy, Warpaint sound stronger than ever. After taking a break, they're more confident in their togetherness, even commemorating their own camaraderie on "By Your Side."

"This album, we made it for us to enjoy," Kokal says. "I would imagine that more often than not, whenever you make something for yourself, it'll translate well to other people because you're psychically giving off that feeling, those good vibes." ★

AARON LEE TASJAN
SILVER TEARS
(NEW WEST) ★ ★ ★ ★

THERE ARE AS many fascinating back stories for the thousands of singer-songwriters that populate Nashville's music scene as there are players. But being a member of the later lineup of the New York Dolls is unique to Aaron Lee Tasjan. And that's just one of the résumé builders that moved him from his Ohio birthplace to Boston then New York on his way to releasing this follow-up to last year's impressive indie debut *In The Blazes*.

That album balanced often caustic humor with memorable songwriting, a recipe he continues here. "It's a hard life, so people get ready/ They'll give you loose gravel and call it rock steady," he sings on the opening "Hard Life," a reflection on the challenges of contemporary living. Tasjan relishes in musical diversity, ranging from the sweet yet darkly melodic, slightly psychedelic Lennon/ELO influenced ballad "Little Movies" (the lyrics provide the album's title) to the Highway 61 ramble of "Out Of My Mind" and the sighing country/folk of "On Your Side."

Tasjan gets bluesy on both the serious "Refugee Blues" and the lighthearted "12 Bar Blues," where he plays with the double meaning of bar as both a musical term and a drinking establishment over a spoken word story that shows he could be a formidable stand-up comic if this music thing doesn't pan out. But the gorgeous, reflective "Memphis Rain," with its reverbed guitar and instantly memorable melody, deserves to be as much a standard as Tom T. Hall's "That's How I Got to Memphis" or Elvis' "Kentucky Rain" and shows Tasjan is just a song away from the big time.

Yet, as he says, "Success ain't about being better than everyone else, it's about being better than yourself." If that's so, *Silver Tears* is an achievement that would make any singer-songwriter proud. — HAL HOROWITZ

BON IVER
22, A MILLION
(JAGJAGUWAR) ★ ★ ★ ★

IT MIGHT NOT be forever ago, but it has been five years since Justin Vernon released a self-titled album under his Bon Iver alias. That album expanded upon the rustic sound of his well-received debut (2007's *For Emma, Forever Ago*) and turbo-boosted Vernon's transformation from an unknown making a breakup album in a secluded cabin to everybody's darling.

The aftershocks of such a seismic change apparently caused the hiatus, as did Vernon's desire to find new ways of expressing himself. *22, A Million* might get labeled as experimental, what with its strange song titles, copious samples, and electronic manipulation of voices and instruments. Not until the fourth song on the album does anything resembling a traditional structure show up, and even that track ("33 "GOD"") soon dissolves into industrial clatter.

But Vernon still holds down the center with his expressive vocals, which whipsaw from pained falsetto to furious groan at a moment's notice. And though the methods might be unconventional, the emotions expressed are still riveting. "715 – CREEKS" is a kind of Auto-Tuned a cappella effort but delivers the same intense relationship angst as "Skinny Love" did on the debut. Vernon also balances compellingly odd moments, like the shards of saxophone coming from all angles on "____45_____," with others more orienting, such as the synth power balladry of "8 (Circle)."

Vernon still puts words together like unwieldy jigsaw pieces, resulting in mouthfuls like "I'm unorphaned in our northern lights/ Dedicoding every daemon." Yet almost every song also contains moments of lyrical clarity amidst the gobbledygook. On the gorgeous album-closer "00000 Million," he sings, "I worry about a worn path/ And I wander off just to come back home." *22, A Million* occasionally confronts and challenges with its willful weirdness, but Bon Iver can still locate that lonely cabin, if only in spirit, when Vernon really wants to dig deep. — JIM BEVIGLIA

JONNY FRITZ
SWEET CREEP
(ATO) ★ ★ ★ ★

IN A GENRE where outlaw posturing is sometimes the easiest way to the top, Jonny Fritz (formerly Jonny Corndawg) has been country's most genuine outsider of outsiders for the better part of a decade. Fritz offers nasally meditations on anything from cunnilingus to fever dreams to municipal garbage collection, and if there's any discernible common thread throughout his four albums, it's that he gravitates toward subjects no sensible Nashville songwriter would ever dare touch.

Fritz's defiant eccentrism has wavered on the spectrum from gimmickry to brilliance, but on *Sweet Creep*, it lands firmly in the latter. On his latest, Fritz delivers songs about seedy motels and lap dogs with a mix of pathos, humor and sadness. His storytelling is concise and compelling, whether he's writing his version of a hit ("Humidifier") or channeling the '70s freak-folk of the Unholy Modal Rounders' *Have Moicy!* on the deeply literal "Chilidog Morning," the latter of which concludes with Fritz repeating, "Give the job to grandma/ Make her chop the onions" for 40 seconds.

With Jim James producing, Fritz once again enlists Dawes' Goldsmith brothers to provide accompaniment. But the real star is Josh Hedley, whose fiddle playing has long defined Fritz's rollicking, trad-country sound.

With 2013's *Dad Country* serving as a transition towards a more grown-up, presentable version of Fritz, the singer-songwriter's now at his best when he's imprinting his own fresh take on standard pop tropes. Who else could begin their "I'm always leaving town" song by pronouncing, "Classical music is so clarinety/ I love meatballs but don't like spaghetti"? On "Fifteen Passenger Van," Fritz strips the classic touring lament of its romance, relying on a litany of nagging specifics to drive his point home.

With his latest, Jonny Fritz cements his standing as a first-rate satirist whose off-kilter sensibility expands and challenges the very boundaries of what constitutes fair game in pop songwriting.
— JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

FRANK OCEAN
BLONDE
(BOYS DON'T CRY) ★ ★ ★ ★

THE FOUR-YEAR HIATUS since Frank Ocean's *Channel Orange* rejuvenated and reimagined R&B drove anticipation for the follow-up to insane levels. And, as might be expected on such a momentous release, there are big-name guest stars aplenty to be found on *Blonde*, including Beyonce, Kendrick Lamar, and James Blake as performers, and Pharrell Williams, Jamie xx, and Vampire Weekend's Rostam Batmanglij among the producers.

What's clear listening to *Blonde* is that Ocean has such a charismatic performing personality that you don't need much input from anyone else to be thoroughly entertained by the record. He is an oversharer in the best possible way, working out his demons concerning fame and love in a refreshingly candid manner. After listening to the album, it's difficult to imagine that Ocean left anything on the table.

For all of the big-name producers, there is a commonality of approach on the album. Ocean's voice is always front and center, even when it's altered into chipmunk tones ("Nikes") or multi-tracked into fetching harmonies ("White Ferrari"). Ocean also flips from deadpan rapping to old-school soul emoting with nary an awkward transition. The musical backing is mostly spare, a slow-motion beat here, a watery organ there. It's probably no coincidence that Ocean mentions "warm jets" on "Close To You," because *Blonde* has the alluring ambience of Brian Eno's production work.

There might not be single songs that jump out as effortlessly as "Thinkin Bout You" and "Super Rich Kids" did from *Channel Orange*, but *Blonde* is a richer listening experience in totality. This is music that fascinates on first listen but requires multiple spins for its complexities and idiosyncrasies to take hold. Don't be surprised if there's another long hiatus in the offing for Ocean, because *Blonde* is the kind of overflowing musical statement from which an artist needs time to recharge and for which an audience needs years to properly appreciate. — JIM BEVIGLIA

LEAGUES
ALONE TOGETHER
(DUALTONE) ★ ★ ★

THOSE WHO DON'T live in or near Nashville likely believe it is populated only by acoustic guitar slinging singer-songwriters honing their craft on scruffy six strings. But there are many other styles of music originating from Music City, and Leagues is a perfect example of the diversity found there.

Anyone who heard 2013's debut from the duo of Thad Cockrell and Jeremy Lutito (a.k.a. Leagues), both music veterans, understands they are more influenced by mid-'80s pop than anything out of Sun Studios. But push that concept further toward MTV-in-its-prime territory and you've got *Alone Together*, the band's sophomore full-length. Even if neither the disc's title nor the band's sound is particularly distinctive, Cockrell and Lutito's shift into superbly constructed synth-based funk pop yields an intoxicating elixir.

Take the murkier aspects of Howard Jones, Human League, Gary Numan and New Order, fold in some dark, intermittently cynical, more often alienated lyrics and you've got an edgy, retro-leaning yet contemporary album as effective on the dance floor as it is at home reading the generally unsettling words, many referring to the complications of love.

Producer Lutito gets credit for the difficult task and impressive restraint of overdubbing multiple instruments he and Cockrell handle, along with guest-backing vocalists and other studio musicians. The songs generally aim for the feet-incorporating strains of anxious funk from Gang of Four and occasionally The Clash. Cockrell handles lead vocals with a voice reflecting hurt and insecurity in words such as "And then I watched you drift away/ I just took a deep breath and cried/ I'll get over you in time/ I'm not ready" from "Slow And Steady."

This release had a challenging genesis with an earlier version ultimately scrapped and re-recorded. The final product successfully combines complex, somewhat obtuse, usually melancholy ideas with keyboard-based melodies that go down easily yet leave an often disturbing aftertaste.
— HAL HOROWITZ

LAMBCHOP
FLOTUS
(MERGE) ★ ★ ★ ★ 1/2

EVEN AS THE BAND'S lineup has ballooned and shriveled, even as its sound has mutated and mushroomed from one record to the next, even as it continues to innovate when its peers are launching nostalgia tours, the one true mainstay in Lambchop has been frontman Kurt Wagner. He writes the lyrics, sings the songs, plays keys and guitar, schedules rehearsals, and presumably fixes speeding tickets. Over 12 albums in 22 years, his low sing-speak croon has distinguished the band by striking a comfy intimacy; he doesn't sing so much as he narrates his oddly poignant scenes of quiet, quirky domestic drama.

On *FLOTUS*, Wagner plays a dramatically different role. He recorded his vocals using a TC-Helicon Voicelive 2 sampler, which allows him to tinker with tone and pitch, to break his syllables in unexpected places, to sing once again in that queasy falsetto from the band's late '90s albums. His voice breaks and creaks on these songs, bends and twists and quavers, delivering pure sound over lyrical meanings. He doesn't write these songs so much as he *un*writes them, and the effect is vividly disorienting, sometimes— as on "NIV" and "Directions To The Can" — even perversely beautiful.

Wagner takes a similarly deconstructive approach to the music, foregrounding the beats of drummer Scott Martin and marrying them to inventive loops and effects. Especially on the 18-minute closer "The Hustle," the effect is bracingly skeletal, achieving a krautrock minimalism that's about as far as you can get from the grandiose countrypolitan arrangements of 2000's landmark *Nixon*. Ultimately, however, it's not *that* far. The mood is familiar, even if the means of evoking it are new. As a result, *FLOTUS* fits surprisingly neatly into Lambchop's catalog, capturing what makes this band so special and hinting at new directions it might take in its next two decades.
— STEPHEN DEUSNER

DAWES

WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE

(HUB) ★ ★ ★ 1/2

ON THE INSTANT-CLASSIC title track of Dawes' last album, lead singer Taylor Goldsmith wished for a long-lost friend what all great music fans truly desire: "May all your favorite bands stay together." On their newest release, *We're All Gonna Die*, the band changes tactics drastically enough that it might risk alienating some narrow-minded supporters. But it also should ensure that the doldrums stay away and that Dawes' loyal fans don't have to contemplate life without them.

Known for Goldsmith's intricate, empathetic lyrics, Dawes makes a concerted effort to rev up the energy level and vary their approach on the new disc. For perhaps the first time in the band's catalog, the rhythms of bassist Wylie Gelber and drummer Griffin Goldsmith demand just as much attention as the words and tunes. Album-opener "One Of Us" is danceable and muscular, while lead single "When The Tequila Runs Out" dabbles in funk rock.

Taylor Goldsmith is a lyricist who sees the forest, the trees, and the contours of every leaf, and his wordy meditations on life sometimes run counter to the band's efforts to diversify their sound; the breezy reggae of "Picture Of A Man" and the Latin lilt of "Less Than Five Miles Away" are uneasy fits. But the band rocks more convincingly here than they ever have before, with the sassy and sarcastic "One Of Us" and the divorce play-by-play "Roll With The Punches" delivering both insight and impact.

Some of the left-field moves turn out to be surprisingly fruitful. Case in point: the melodically rich "For No Good Reason," with its circus-like atmosphere and Harrisonian slide guitar. And it wouldn't be a Dawes album without heartfelt, late-night balladry, which is where the lovely "Roll Tide" enters the picture. Since their music so effortlessly recalls the best of Jackson Browne, consider *We're All Gonna Die* to be Dawes' version of Browne's '80s curve ball *Lawyers In Love*, a stylistic detour with high points that outweigh the misfires. — JIM BEVIGLIA

PIXIES

HEAD CARRIER

(PIAS AMERICA) ★ ★ ★ ★ 1/2

ONE SUPREMELY COOL thing about the Pixies these days is that, by now, their entire back-catalog ('87-'91) is considered timeless material. It's almost fetishized in light of the less impactful trio of EPs that formed 2014's *Indie Cindy*, the Boston-based quartet's long-awaited follow-up to 1991's *Trompe Le Monde* and first album recorded without original bassist Kim Deal. Where those tunes lacked seminal spark, *Head Carrier* is trusty yet imaginative without pretense, bursting with newfound self-assuredness bolstered by decades of experience.

Familiar elements – Black Francis' unrivalled vocal battering ram, Joey Santiago's jarring yet catchy guitar leads, David Lovering's precise beats, and the angelic vocal juxtaposition provided by new bassist Paz Lenchantin – culminate into distinct yet varied styles: sunny, wistful songs ("Might As Well Be Gone," "Plaster Of Paris"), buoyant, beguiling surefire hits ("Talent" and "Tenement Song"), introspective ballads ("All The Saints") and incendiary, often satisfyingly snarky punk-fueled forays ("Baals Back" & "Um Chagga Lagga"). Though sonically unmistakable, characteristic heft from producer Tom Dalgety (Royal Blood, Opeth, Band of Skulls) lends the album superb new swagger – it's the natural next chapter in the band's ever-influential canon.

The 12-song collection is likewise a keeper because it re-embraces the resplendent interplay between masculine and feminine signatures, somewhat lost on *Indie Cindy*. Those emerge masterfully here with constant collaboration with Lenchantin, whose presence is frequent and forthright – her indispensible role is confirmed with a turn as frontwoman on "All I Think About Now."

That co-written cut is described candidly by Francis as a tribute to Deal – "Remember when we were happy?/ If I'm late can I thank you now?" – yet it also works as a universal lover's lament. Within those dual contexts, it's the album's centerpiece and conceptual crux: just as the silver lining of a painful past romance finally put to rest is a liberated, wisened perspective, Pixies' full acceptance of the shifts in their schema only further solidify their inimitable identity. The exultant result: *Head Carrier*, a new classic. — DAVID HALL

THE HOLIDAY GEAR GUIDE

FEATURING JESSICA MAROS AND TYLER JAMES OF ESCONDIDO

BY RICK MOORE | PHOTOS BY MACKENZIE MOORE

CORDOBA MINI SM-CE ACOUSTIC-ELECTRIC TRAVEL GUITAR

(Street: $329.99)

It's billed as both a travel guitar and as a mini classical guitar. Well, it's both. As fun to play as it is unique, Cordoba's Mini SM-CE Acoustic-Electric can serve several different needs. With nylon strings and a neck just a few hundredths of an inch slimmer than a standard classical guitar neck, it works great for the player with classical and fingerpicking chops, as well as for thumb-strumming and for lead playing with its cutaway.

With a 2-band pickup system and an end-pin jack, it's just as much at home on the stage as it is on the couch, in the back of a car, or around the campfire. At about 30½ inches long, it's 10 to 12 inches shorter than a standard acoustic guitar. The tuning is a little different, with the sixth string tuned to A instead of E, and the rest of the strings tuned to typical guitar string intervals from that low A upwards. This guitar is a great-sounding, great-looking and all-round enjoyable little instrument.

TAYLOR 414CE-R ACOUSTIC-ELECTRIC GUITAR

(Street: $2,199)

Taylor hits a home run with its new 414ce-R acoustic-electric. With a Grand Auditorium-shape body that has Indian rosewood back and sides and a Sitka spruce top, this guitar is one of Taylor's most affordable with these types of woods. The ebony fretboard plays like a dream, and the ebony bridge and Tusq nut and Micarta saddle add to the expressive sound of this axe. The sound is well-balanced and the action makes for easy playing all the way up the neck, which joins the body at the 14th fret. The Venetian cutaway allows pretty easy access up to the 17th fret.

Taylor's ES2 electronics system sounds great. The proprietary pickup behind the saddle involves three individually calibrated piezo-electric sensors that respond naturally to the instrument's acoustic energy as it's transferred through the saddle, making for a sound that is more organic and less electronic than some pickup systems. It comes with a five-latch hardshell case to help protect it from both the rigors of the road and nosy kids on Christmas Day.

BATSON TROUBADOUR GC21 GRAND CONCERT ACOUSTIC-ELECTRIC GUITAR
(Street: $1,699)

Batson's gorgeous Troubadour GC21 Grand Concert acoustic-electric is a versatile instrument that's good for both writing and performing. With a body size that's in the neighborhood of a 000, its mid-range projection makes it perfect for cutting above resonator instruments or for fingerpicking, especially when looking for that blues or ragtime plucked sound. The cantilevered neck joins the body at the 14th fret with a cutaway that makes all 21 frets accessible, and the soundhole is in the upper bout instead of the guitar top.

The guitar is made of East Indian rosewood and Sitka spruce, with a flamed maple bevel armrest, flamed maple binding, and ebony fingerboard and tailpiece. The neck width at the nut is 1.75, a few one-hundredths of an inch wider than many guitars. And if nothing else, it's a cool axe for bragging rights when it comes to playing something everybody else on the block doesn't have. Designed in Nashville, it comes with a hardshell case. See all of the company's guitars at www.batsonguitars.com.

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YAMAHA

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1. BREEDLOVE OREGON CONCERT BOURBON ACOUSTIC-ELECTRIC GUITAR

(Street: $1,999)

Breedlove Guitars is known for doing things a little differently, and the company's Oregon Concert Bourbon acoustic-electric is a case in point. Finished with a bourbon-tinted stain that gives it a gorgeous hue, this guitar is made of a wood that isn't the industry norm, but the sound certainly doesn't suffer because of it. The top, back and sides are made of myrtlewood, from a broadleaf evergreen tree found in Oregon and California. This wood makes for a sound that is different from more traditional tonewoods like spruce and mahogany, but is easily as good in its own way, with excellent tone and balance.

With a lower bout measurement of 15", a little smaller than a Dreadnought, this special-edition guitar is good for someone who doesn't want a Dread or Jumbo size but still wants the volume, something this guitar isn't lacking. Equipped with the top-shelf LR Baggs EAS VTC pickup, it's a wonderful axe, and one that your neighbors probably aren't playing. Comes with a classy red-stitched hardshell case.

2. TAYLOR 712E 12-FRET WESTERN SUNBURST ACOUSTIC-ELECTRIC GUITAR

(Street: $2,949)

If you're looking for a versatile acoustic/electric with smaller body but a big sound, Taylor's 712e might be the ticket. This 12-fret (meaning the neck joins the body at the 12th fret) guitar, with a body in the neighborhood of a 00 size, is good for players of all sizes. The guitar is responsive and louder than one might expect for its smaller size when playing rhythm, but it also cuts for lead and is perfect for fingerstyle picking.

The 712e features a Lutz spruce top with Indian rosewood back and sides, and those woods, in concert with the mahogany neck and ebony fingerboard and bridge, make for an axe with a broad tonal range. Electronically, the guitar features Taylor's top-notch ES2 system with an end-pin jack. And it looks as good as it sounds, with Hawaiian koa binding, a herringbone-style rosette featuring Douglas fir with maple/black accents, slotted headstock, and a new "weathered brown" pickguard design. Modeled in part after some of the great guitars of old, it's still as modern as it gets.

3. FENDER PM-1 PARAMOUNT DREADNOUGHT ACOUSTIC GUITAR

(Street: $600)

Part of Fender's Paramount acoustic guitar series, the PM-1 Dreadnought all-mahogany acoustic guitar is everything a good Dread should be, while at the same time being one of the most lightweight such guitars on the market. It's plenty loud with great bottom, mids and highs, but it's also responsive for those quiet passages and for nuanced picking and strumming.

The PM-1 has mahogany neck, top, back and sides, and the top's open-pore finish – a thin finish that allows the wood to "breathe" – provides a natural-to-the-touch feel of the wood itself, as well as a warmer and earthier tone. It has a rosewood fretboard and bridge, ebony bridge pins, bone nut and saddle, a '60s-style headstock with nickel open-back tuning machines, and '60s checkerboard rosette and purfling that look great with all the mahogany. It also has a dual-action truss rod and a forward (as in just above the heel cap) strap button for playing standing up. With no onboard electronics, this is truly an acoustic player's guitar. Comes with a deluxe hardshell case and humidifier.

4. GUILD JUMBO JUNIOR ACOUSTIC-ELECTRIC GUITAR

(Street: $399)

If you like the body shape of Guild's Jumbo but not its size, or just want a smaller acoustic-electric with that cool Jumbo look, you're in luck with Guild's new Jumbo Junior. It's got a 14-and-a-half inch lower bout, similar to a 00 body size, with a little shorter 19-fret-total neck that joins the body at the 14th fret. It's got a Sitka spruce top and your choice of either mahogany or maple back and sides, and has uniform action and good tonal balance with a bone nut and saddle, mahogany neck, and rosewood fingerboard.

The Jumbo Junior is also a winner aesthetically, with a tortoiseshell pickguard complemented by a mother-of-pearl rosette, cool black-and-white top purfling and white ABS binding. The chrome tuners are the vintage open-gear type and the headstock has that iconic Guild lettering. It also sounds great plugged in, with the piezo pickup's tone and volume controls discreetly hidden inside the top of the soundhole. This guitar is especially impressive for the price and comes with a padded gig bag.

5. OVATION C2059AXP 12-STRING ACOUSTIC-ELECTRIC GUITAR

(Street: $1,299)

If you've wondered how Richie Sambora got that guitar sound on "Wanted Dead Or Alive," or exactly what Don Felder is playing on the iconic "Hotel California" intro, then you need to check out a 12-string, and Ovation's C2059AXP acoustic-electric 12-string is a good choice. This guitar totally fits the stereotype of what a 12-string is supposed to sound like, namely, big and orchestral, both acoustically and when plugged into an amp.

Playing a 12-string can take some chops because of the unevenness of the different string gauges, but the good action and setup of the C2059AXP go a long way in making it easier. This cutaway-body guitar has great uniform action and intonation all the way up its 20-fret neck, and it's gorgeous to boot, with abalone inlay and a classy ebony pinless bridge. It has a top of quilted maple veneer over AAA spruce, and a back made of Ovation's patented Lyrachord, the glass filament material that made Ovation an innovator in the field. This is a really sweet guitar at a great price.

6. YAMAHA FS850 ACOUSTIC GUITAR

(Street: $399.99)

The FS850 is part of Yamaha's popular FS acoustic series, and the guitar's "warm and woody" sound, as Yamaha describes it, comes from the use of mahogany not only for the back and sides, but for the top as well. And the sound is indeed as advertised, balanced and comfortable without any harsh overtones or sonic surprises. This concert guitar, with a smaller body than a Dreadnought, has a new (to Yamaha) scalloped bracing pattern that contributes to a little more punch in the lower and mid-range frequencies without losing the crisp highs.

This is a good singer-songwriter instrument, an expressive smaller guitar that especially shines when used for rhythm and fingerstyle playing. The neck is made of nato, a wood of Central and South America, and it has a rosewood fingerboard. The bridge and headstock overlay are also rosewood, and the tuning machines are sealed chrome. With a tortoise-pattern pickguard and an abalone ring inlay around the soundhole that really complements the mahogany top, the FS850 looks as good as it sounds.

MARTIN 00L-17 ACOUSTIC GUITAR
(Street: $1,859)

It's unusual to find a new guitar that looks, feels and plays like it actually came from the days when U.S. guitar-building was still in its infancy, but Martin has created just that with the 00L-17 acoustic. At first glance it looks like something from the history-making 1930s Gibson L-series guitars (think Robert Johnson), right down to the 12th-fret neck/body merge. But a couple good finger-pulled double stops with alternating bass leave no doubt that this is a Martin, in tone and in feel. With a smaller 000-14 body type, this axe is ideal for pickin' out a mess of blues, or for strumming along on a retro country tune or a song of one's own making.

With a well-balanced sound that's supported by bone nut and saddle, and a body of mahogany and spruce, Martin scores big with a guitar that is both classic and modern. The 00L-17 is available in either a sweet whiskey sunset burst version or in a black smoke model with a cool ivory pickguard, and comes with a hardshell case.

JBL EON 208P PA

(Street: $699)

JBL Professional by HARMAN introduced JBL's EON 208P at Winter NAMM 2016 as a very portable, self-contained PA system. It has two EON-style cabinets that lock into a unit that houses an 8-channel mixer and 300 watt power amp. If portability is important to you, the 208P gives you a complete, rugged sound system in a 39-pound package.

The 208P's first four channels can accept either ¼-inch instrument cable or XLR inputs and each channel provides individual volume, reverb, treble and bass controls. Additionally, channels 1-3 allow for both phantom power and Hi-Z direct inputs. Channels 5 and 6 can accept either a stereo pair of ¼-inch TRS connectors or stereo RCA cables for use with keyboards or line level devices. Channels 7 and 8 can accept a stereo 3.5mm input for mobile devices and Bluetooth-enabled devices are connected via a simple pair button. With an 8" woofer and 1" neodymium black nylon dome tweeter, each EON speaker can provide a frequency response from 60 to 20,000 Hz and the speakers' light weight makes for easy pole mounting.

— ANDY MCDONOUGH

FENDER T-BUCKET 400 CE FLAMED MAPLE ACOUSTIC-ELECTRIC GUITAR

(Street: $290)

Put simply, the Fender T-Bucket 400 CE is an excellent guitar buy this season. Fender has outdone itself with this beautiful Dreadnought acoustic-electric, which sounds and plays as good as it looks.

The flamed finish of the 400 CE is gorgeous, but this guitar is more than just eye candy. The highs and lows are really good for a guitar in this price range, and the mids cut wonderfully. But that's when it's not plugged in. Electronically, Fishman's Isys III pickup system does a great job, and it includes an onboard tuner as well. And while the harmonics in the usual spots (12th, 7th and 5th frets) come through loud and clear as they should, they ring like a fireman's bell even from the bottom of the neck over the soundhole to the bridge, showing the excellent attention that was paid to setup detail. This guitar is awesome for the price, and is perfect for both the beginning player and for someone who's going to use it on stage every night.

YAMAHA EMX2 POWERED MIXER

(Street: $399)

Live performance is essential for many singer-songwriters. Fortunately, you no longer need a van full of sound gear to get great sound. Yamaha's EMX2 compact powered mixer puts a 500 watt power amplifier and a 10-channel mixer with four reverb types and 3-band EQ into an impressive 14.8" x 5.8" x 8.7" package.

Designed for the solo performer or small group, the EMX2 is a 10-channel mixer with four microphone/line inputs along with three stereo line inputs. The designers thoughtfully added both RCA and mini jack inputs for easy playback of recorded audio. An important feature for many singer-songwriters is the availability of phantom power and a high-impedance input allowing you to use both high-performance condenser microphones and connect guitars directly. Features that the EMX2 provides not found on many mixers are a subwoofer out and speaker impedance selection. Only experienced audio people will likely make use of these, but they speak to the fact that this mixer is professional audio gear. — A.M.

YAMAHA EMX7 POWERED MIXER

(Street: $749.99)

Yamaha's EMX7 powered mixer features a built-in high-efficiency power amplifier (two channels rated 710 watts each) along with four mono input channels and four mono/stereo input channels. Perfect for band use in medium-size venues, performers can plug in up to eight microphones and several line-level devices such as keyboards and playback devices.

A nice feature of all the EMX series mixers is support for Hi-Z instruments like guitars or basses. In addition, the EMX7 is equipped with two aux send connections for monitoring both record and stereo outputs to connect to an external recorder. Features that audio professionals will appreciate are Yamaha's speaker processor and presets (to match the mixer to the specific Yamaha speaker designs), a bass boost function, and a graphic equalizer allowing for the selection of up to nine bands of EQ out of a total of 31 for fine-tuning frequencies. The EMX7's impressive effects section includes 24 different professional quality reverb, delay and other effects. — A.M.

Mackie DX8 Wireless Digital Mixer

(Street Price: $299.99)

Mackie's new ultra-compact ProDX8 digital mixer offers an intuitive interface, powerful signal processing and complete wireless control. The unit has six mic/instrument inputs, an 1/8" input, two aux sends, stereo outputs, headphone output, onboard signal processing, and Bluetooth connectivity. While it might not look like mixers you've used before, the compact ProDX hardware and the intuitive control app (available for both iOS and Android) are well worth exploring for performing singer-songwriters, as well as duos and small bands.

All ProDx mixers are equipped with Mackie's great sounding Wide-Z mic preamps on channels that allow for connection of microphones and instruments. Adjust sound from the front panel hardware or Mackie's free MixerConnect control app. Performers also have the ability to wirelessly play back music or backing tracks from any Bluetooth device. All the ProDX models have a "control bridge", a convenient place to park your tablet or phone.

Each ProDX channel has a 3-band EQ with sweepable mid, low cut and compression, plus access to an impressive, built-in effects engine with 16 great sounding effects. A flexible graphic EQ on all outputs allows for the fine tuning of the overall mix. Best of all, mixes can be saved to presets to make future set-ups fast and easy. — A.M.

Galaxy Audio GPS-8

(Street Price: $199.99)

The GPS-8 is a powered 8" speaker, delivering up to 200 watts and a nice full sound. We tested the unit in multiple scenarios – as a floor monitor for an acoustic duo, a trio with percussion, and as a drum monitor. In each case, the GPS-8 did not let the performers down. Setting the volume level on the back of the unit between 12 and 1 o'clock seemed to be the sweet spot. We even used the GPS-8 as a main PA speaker facing towards an audience in a small listening room venue and it did its job well. The Bass Boost feature on the back control panel helps to enhance the low end.

The GPS-8's unique asymmetrical shape allows for wedge placement or pole mounting, with a carry handle on the side and an indent for gripping from the top. Additional units can be linked via a XLR-M pass through jack.

Other features of GPS-8 include: built-in limiter, lighted power switch, universal power supply and a lightweight, durable, compact, attractive housing. Four M8 threaded suspension points are accessible for permanent mounting of the unit.

If you're looking to save space on stage, ease your load-in and setup, and not sacrifice your performance with a bad sound mix, the Galaxy GPS-8 just might do the trick for you. Your back and wallet will also thank you.
— WALTER LINDLEY

Yamaha 502T RevStar

(Street Price: $$729)

Could there be anyone better than Yamaha to subtly combine trendy design elements of motorcycles and electric guitars? With a common body style that hints of previous generations of Yamaha guitars and style elements borrowed from classic guitars and motorcycle designs, Yamaha's new line of RevStar guitars not only look great, they are quality instruments that sport the quality hardware and electronics needed to produce great tone.

The new RevStar models are all similar in shape, with solid mahogany body designs, maple caps and mahogany necks. While these guitar models all have a bit of a retro look to them, each offers the player an instrument that plays well and can produce a surprisingly wide variety of tone. We found the two models we reviewed, the 502T and RS820CR, to be well built and equally playable with flat fingerboards, full c-shaped necks and jumbo frets. A useful feature of both models we reviewed was a tone control that pops up to act as a 'dry switch.' When engaged, this control is a high pass filter that rolls off some of the considerable 'fatness' that these guitars can produce. Unlike a 'coil tap' approach used to achieve a similar effect, the 'dry switch' gets you quickly to that classic single-pickup tone without losing the hum-cancelling properties of the humbucker pickups.

In both motorsports and guitars, it's all about personal styling and performance and both the RS502T and RS820CR RevStar guitars have plenty of both. These are substantial, well-balanced guitars with plenty of neck and solid wood to give them a serious feel. Built in Indonesia, the back of each RevStar headstock bears a Far East traditional hanko im-

pression, a traditional form of signature for documents, contracts and art. The unique shape of the guitars, mostly flat face and back, and vintage looking broad almond binding that runs up neck and around the headstock are striking. But don't overlook the fact that Yamaha, in addition to building motorcycles, has 50 years of guitar-building experience. That bit of history shows in these models.
— A.M.

LD Maui 5 Ultra Portable Column Speaker System

(Street Price: $599.99)

The LD Maui 5 is dubbed "ultra portable" by the manufacturer, and it surely is. It's rated at 200 watts (RMS) and 800 watts (peak) and produces quite a lot of sound for a small system. If you are a solo acoustic performer looking to play small venues, LD's Maui 5 is a great choice. A very nice feature is the ability to control the amount of low-end sound via a sub-level knob. Using the main output control and the sub-level control you can find the perfect balance for any situation you find yourself in. The overall sound of the Maui 5 was great for both acoustic guitar and piano.

The input section of the mixer built into the Maui 5 is minimal, but certainly enough for a solo performer with one mic or line channel, high-z channel and Bluetooth/MP3 inputs. Vocal performers might miss effects, but you can use an external mixer with effects to solve that problem and provide additional inputs.

In terms of venue coverage, the system boasts a 120-degree horizontal and 20-degree vertical dispersion pattern. In larger rooms, or situations where an audience is above you (seated on bleachers) or below you (when you're on a stage), a 20-degree vertical dispersion might be an issue, but for covering intimate performing venues, the Maui 5 makes an ideal companion for a performer. — A.M.

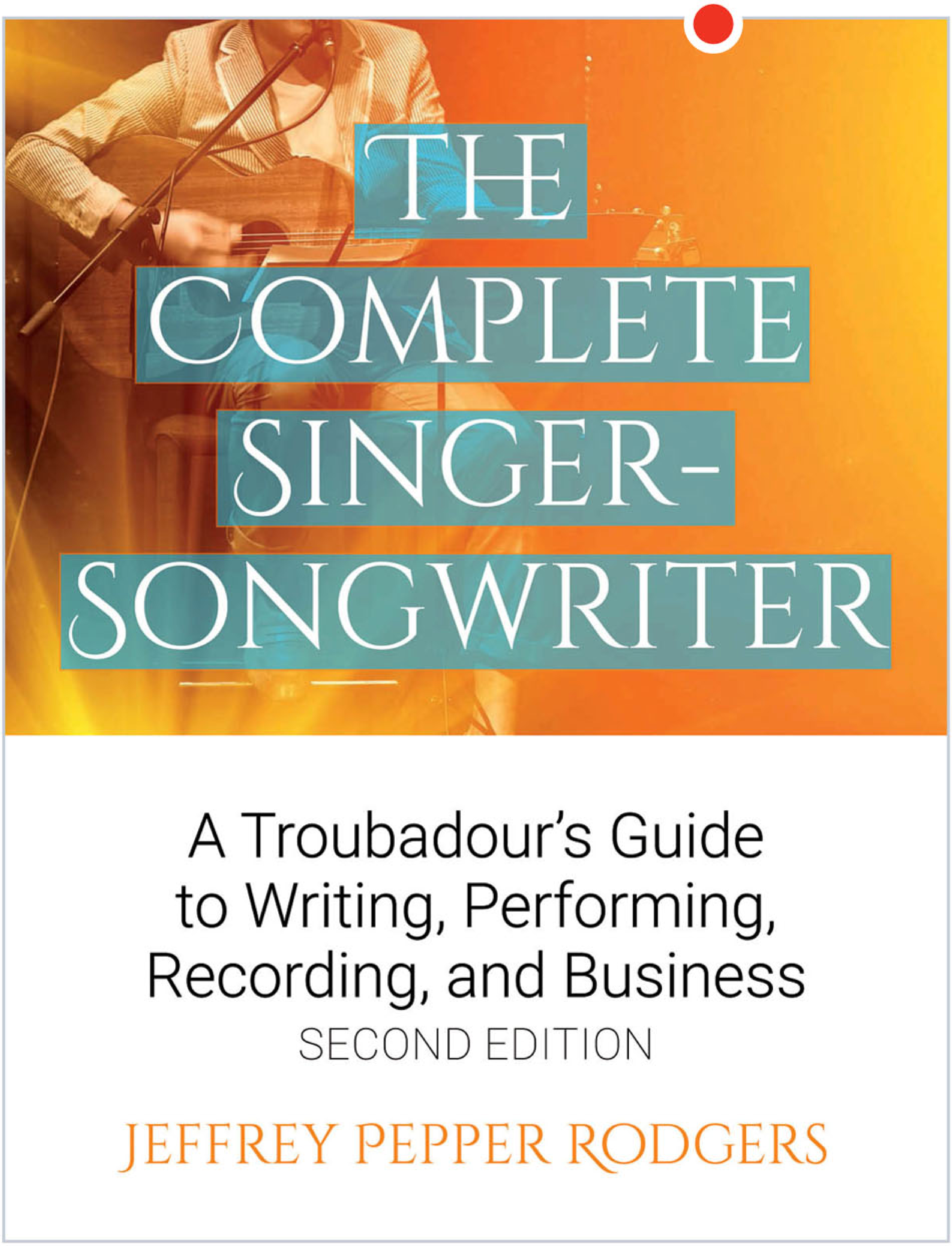
The Complete Singer-Songwriter

(Street Price: $19.99)

The Complete Singer-Songwriter is the ultimate guide for the modern performer, chock full of tips, tools, and inspiration for both aspiring troubadours and those looking to take their craft and career to the next level. Author Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers draws on firsthand interviews with songwriting legends and rising stars; expert advice from managers, agents, lawyers, and publishers; and his own experiences as a performing songwriter. He offers this invaluable companion for singer-songwriters on their journey from idea to song to the stage, studio, and beyond.

New in the second edition:
- A songwriter's guide to chord progressions
- Understanding song form and rhyme
- Dozens of songwriting games and exercises
- Essential info on copyrighting your songs, music publishing, and digital royalties
- Online companion at completesinger-songwriter.com with playlists and additional resources

Ben Harper calls *The Complete Singer-Songwriter* "the most creatively valuable book on the subject" with songwriting tips and techniques from more than 100 artists, including Joni Mitchell, John Mayer, Paul Simon, Rosanne Cash, Jewel, Jeff Tweedy, Ani DiFranco, James Taylor, John Fogerty, Brandi Carlile, Richard Thompson, Jason Mraz, Rodney Crowell, Jerry Garcia, Dar Williams, and more. — A.M.



JBL EON ONE

(Street Price: $999)

As a working musician, if you can't move your sound system, set it up quickly or, if you find yourself reaching in to try and beat feedback for the first set, your sound system needs an overhaul. The design of the JBL EON One makes everything convenient. It's an all-in-one, easy to transport column-type PA which not only sounds good – it could change the way you think about portable sound systems. With no speaker wires to fuss with, no speaker stands to unpack, and an integrated six-channel mixer with reverb at your disposal, you can have your sound system set up to cover a fair-sized room in seconds. A solo songwriter could carry just two cables — one for voice, and one for an instrument.

Just one more thing about the physical design: the "stick" part of the system breaks down into three pieces that are stored right in the bottom part of the system, locked down by a protective handle that covers the mixer. The entire unit weighs in the neighborhood of 40 lbs., so it's easy to carry and fits nicely in a trunk or seat.

Some stick systems I've used seem to require a lot of adjustment to sound correct. The basic design of the EON ONE made setup easy the very first time I used it. Plus, it was easy to get a great sound right from the first song.
— A.M.

Roland "ELCajon" EC-10 Electronic Layered Cajon

(Street Price: $399)

Roland's new EC-10 cajon gives players all

the basics of a traditional cajon, plus electronically sampled sounds that the player can layer in to give songs a new dimension. Essentially, the ELCajon is an acoustic instrument with a percussion sound module built right in. Pretty clever.

The ELCajon works as a normal, acoustic cajon, but, to expand the capabilities, Roland has implanted some electronic percussion technology into it. By using the internal voices the player can blend a range of other percussion sounds with the natural cajon voice.

It's an interesting idea: bringing an ancient instrument up-to-date with modern electronics. With just a few controls on top of the box, I was able to easily dial up a tambourine and shaker or add some electronic drum sounds and a djembe. It was just as easy to give the cajon a more modern sound by adding snare backbeats and bringing in some low-end thump to imply a kick drum. Dig deeper and you can adjust the added sounds with thresholds to get just the sound you are looking for.

The ELCajon comes with 30 "built-in" electronic percussion kits for layering with acoustic cajon sounds. Each kit includes two independent sounds that can be triggered from the center of the face and at the edge of the playing surface to support a wide range of music styles. With its compact size and versatility, the cajon can travel anywhere. There's also an input for playing music from a smartphone or iPod for some play-along fun. — A.M.

LYRIC CONTEST

1ST PLACE

"You Make Sense"
Jay Burgin
Cincinnati, Ohio

Art is just graffiti with a plaque and a frame
Science is just nature with a Latin name
Religion is just finding out who to blame

But you, you make sense to me
Yeah, you make sense to me

War is just ego with a battle plan
Time is just fear in a glass full of sand
Family is just a myth with a wedding band

But you, you make sense to me
Yeah, you make sense to me

I'm just a man with a story untold
You're just a woman with a heart of gold
We're just living in a world that's oh so cold

But you, you make sense to me
Yeah you, you make sense to me

The more that I learn, the more that I doubt,
the more that I don't want to leave my house

The more that I know, the more that I doubt,
the more that I just can't get off my couch

But you, you make sense to me
Yeah you, you make sense to me

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TO ENTER THE JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2017 CONTEST

2ND PLACE

"Mount Everest"
Frank Renfordt
Hagen, Germany

He met his Appalachian girl
in a summer camp
she became his wife and his best friend
They found a place on earth
to settle down
big skies and green grass all around
They got a couple of kids and a lazy dog
hanging out on the porch
and a four-wheel-drive ten year old Dodge

They're working hard
to keep the wheels on turning
rarely skipping church
on Sunday morning
and he was always feeling alright
with some friends and a cold beer at the
barbecue on Saturday night

Some people's dreams
ain't big enough to fail
they never play a leading part
in an heroic tale
but to live a life full of love and happiness
you don't need to climb Mount Everest

Summer came and summer left
and autumn brought another gift
it wasn't long after
the youngest had left home
when the first grandchild came along

Now they spent some more time
by the sea
she lent her hand to a charity
and was always feeling fine
when everybody's coming home
at Christmas time

Some people's dreams
ain't big enough to fail
they never play a leading part
in an heroic tale
but to live a life full of love and happiness
you don't need to climb Mount Everest

When she got sick and needed care
he spoon-fed her and combed her hair
and at the moment she passed away
he whispered sweet nothings in her ear
while his eyes were filling up with tears

Sitting in his rocking chair
missing his Appalachian girl
one thing he's really sure about
he will meet her again
in a different world

Some people's dreams
ain't big enough to fail
they never play a leading part
in an heroic tale
but to live a life full of love and happiness
you don't need to climb Mount Everest

Some people's dreams
ain't big enough to fail
they never play a leading part
in an heroic tale
but to live a life full of love and happiness
you don't need to climb Mount Everest

you don't have to climb Mount Everest

NOVEMBER DECEMBER WINNERS

3RD PLACE

"Different Ways"
Kevin Zak
Novi, Michigan

I try, I try, I try
To say everything just right
But when I don't say the right word
Just know that if I could

I would paint you a picture

Like it was brushed by Monet
I would sing like Sinatra
And take your breath away
I would write you a story
To say all I want to say
In a way so deep
Like it was all written
By Hemingway
A song so the melody
Would get stuck inside your head
A story so these feelings
Don't ever get misread
And a picture so I'd have
A thousand words to say
That I love you baby
In so many different ways

One day I'll drop
My knee down to the floor
Ask you to be my
Forever and more
But if the words don't come out
Exactly as they should
Just know they mean so much more
And remember if I could

When I'm old and gray
I'll just want you to know
You made this life worth living
With a love I won't outgrow
So when I'm down to my last breath
I'll find the strength to say
That I love you baby
In so many different ways

4TH PLACE

"Another Man's Coal"
Gary Beckstead
Taylorsville, Utah

We all work hard
to earn the mighty dollar.
Some work hard, in dirt and squalor.
Others in palaces, indulgences to feed.
Some find sorrow, in all their greed.

One man's coal is another man's gold.
One man's gold is another man's coal.
It's not what's in your pockets,
it's what's inside your soul.

We believe that money
brings peace to the soul
Riches and excess is every man's goal
We're still not happy, with riches we're blind
Be it comfort or sorrow, it's what you'll find.

One man's coal is another man's gold.
One man's gold is another man's coal.
It's not what's in your pockets,
it's what's inside your soul.

You can be happy, no matter life's state
Happiness is a choice that you make
Sorrow's created, by actions that you take
Be it happiness or sorrow,
you choose your own fate

One man's coal is another man's gold.
One man's gold is another man's coal.
It's not what's in your pockets,
it's what's inside your soul

HONORABLE MENTION

"Green Eyes"
Patty Lakamp
Carmel, California

"Backseat Love"
Richard M. Schroder
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts

"The Lesser Of Two Evils"
Douglas Kwartler
Chelmsford, Massachusetts

"If The Devil Has A Name"
Jeffrey Ellis
South Charleston, West Virginia

"That One Time"
Heather Aubrey Lloyd
Catonsville, Maryland

"Brave Old New York"
Ryan Schmitz
Laurel Hollow, New York

"Red White And Blues"
Grace Gonzalez
Nashville, Tennessee

"Home"
Karen Biser
Augusta, Maine

"Drive This Love"
Dani Hoy
Key West, Florida

"In My Cubicle"
Ed Rosney
Portland, Oregon

AMERICAN SONGWRITER LYRIC CONTEST Q&A

1ST PLACE

"You Make Sense"

Written by Jay Burgin

Interview by Caine O'Rear

What was the inspiration for this song?
The origin of this song came from a conversation I had with a friend about art. I said something along the lines of: "If you framed all the graffiti in a subway station, and put a plaque next to it, you could probably charge people museum admission." I wrote that down on my phone, and then for weeks I thought about the value systems and the institutions in our society, and how they may not be what we think. Art, science, religion, etc. are bigger than any one person can know. All of these things I am able to doubt. But, I can get a grasp on those I care about and love. These thoughts inspired my first verse of lyrics, and then momentum did the rest.

Do you have a line or a couplet from the song that you're particularly proud of?
"The more that I know, the more that I doubt, the more that I just can't get off my couch." I think this line speaks to the collective apathy and cynicism in our communities. We see it at the polls on Election Day, we see it on talk shows, and we see it in the classroom. I think a lot of us are frustrated with how disconnected and indifferent we have become, and how it is so difficult to get up off the couch and make a difference.

Did you flesh out a melody for this and did you record it?
"You Make Sense" is a song I wrote for the piano. I was aiming for an intense, impassioned ballad about the search for answers in a time of great confusion. The music itself combines a rock progression with a classical piano spin. You can check out a recording of "You Make Sense" on my YouTube channel and on my SoundCloud.

Do you do any other kinds of writing? Poems? Prose?
Besides songwriting, I am also an avid blogger and journalist. I have my own music blog, called Songscripts (songscripts.com), where I give my own take on what is happening in the world of music. I discuss lyrics, musical themes and imagery, music culture, and the industry itself.

Do you have a favorite songwriter or songwriters? What is it you like about their work?
It's a three-way tie right now between Okkervil River, Conor Oberst, and The Avett Brothers. I love these artists because they are innovative in their storytelling, taking a specific mood and confronting the listener with it. Their instrumentation is purposely incomplete at times, and their lyrics pack a punch. At some times their work is poignant and political, at other times, deeply personal, and in a few cases, mysterious and whimsical.

"AN INITIAL IDEA CAN TAKE A SONG IN THOUSANDS OF DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS."

What are the goals for your songwriting?
I would love to make a career out of songwriting. The craft of songwriting — starting from scratch and building a melody or a lyric from the ground up — is so gripping. In the long run, I want to write songs for other artists and/or make albums of my own. If that puts enough bread on the table, I'd be thrilled. In the short-term, I want to open up opportunities for collaborating with other musicians and write for different genres.

Are you also a performer?
Yes, I'm a performer at heart. I play piano and guitar mainly, but I also love to experiment with different types of instrumentation. I have spent a lot of my life singing in a cappella groups, accompanying bands, and singing in musical theater, but I thrive when it is just me on stage with my instrument, where I can tell a story and rock a groovy melody, true to the singer-songwriter ideal.

Jay Burgin. Photo courtesy Jay Burgin

What is one thing you've learned about songwriting that you wish you'd known when you got started?
I wish I knew a lot of things about songwriting that I know now, and I'm sure I'll be saying the same thing ten years from now. I have written about 150 songs since I began songwriting, and if you looked back at my first few songs, you can tell I've come a long way. Now I have learned that an initial idea can take a song in thousands of different directions, and that there is no formula to writing a good song. Once I broke out of the mindset of how my songs should be, the creativity really began to flow. ★

You can hear Jay's music at soundcloud.com/jayburgin.

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JOHN PAUL WHITE

John Paul White is a Grammy-winning singer-songwriter based in Florence, Alabama. He was one half of the acclaimed duo the Civil Wars, and released his second solo album, Beulah, in 2016. He is a co-owner, along with Ben Tanner of the Alabama Shakes, of Florence's Single Lock Records.

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Gibson Guitar varies for each contest. (For official rules and deadlines, please visit: www.americansongwriter.com/lyric-contest/lyric-rules-and-deadlines. Dates are subject to change.) The contest is open to any amateur songwriter. American Songwriter defines an amateur as one who has not earned more than $5,000 from songwriting related royalties, advances, or works for hire. The American Songwriter staff judges the first round and the second round is judged by a panel of music industry professionals, including executives from record companies, publishing companies, and PROs. The Top 4 winners and 10 Honorable Mentions are determined by a point system based on the judges' selections. The judges do not see the names of the entrants. **We are no longer accepting mail-in entries.**

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By Sara Jayne Crow

MOOG
THROUGH THE DECADES

Rarely do inventors with the foresight to span generations and decades get their due within their lifetimes. This is the case with so many virtuosos of various trades: Cymande, Brian Eno, Drexciya, Syd Barrett, Dr. Simon Warner and especially Bob Moog.

Moog left an indelible mark on musical history when he introduced handcrafted Moog Modular prototypes at the Audio Engineering Society (AES) convention in 1964. While there had been experimental production in music following WWII and the advent of the tape machine, many musicians were limited in their ability to manipulate music. The tape machine allowed non-linear editing, leading to experimentation with electronic sounds, oscillators and filters. Musicians suddenly had new tools beyond requisite strings, keys, drums and horns. This bred a small movement of experimental music making, but artists were still hindered by lack of tools — splicing a tape or playing it backwards was relatively limiting.

Moog had been tinkering with sound oscillation from a young age and built his first theremin at the age of 14. He incorporated R.A. Moog in 1953 — at age 19 — and sold do-it-yourself theremin kits. In 1963, Moog met educator and experimental musician Herb Deutsch. The first voltage-controlled modular synthesizer arose from their collaboration, which was unveiled at the 1964 AES convention. Moog also met musician Wendy Carlos by chance at this conference. Carlos says of that meeting, "[Moog provided] voltage-controlled oscillators, filters, envelopers, controllers — things the still-primitive world of electroacoustic music long needed."

Wendy and Moog forged a friendship and became working partners, leading to Carlos' triple Grammy-winning stunner *Switched-On Bach*, arguably the most seminal recording in the history of synthesis. The album was groundbreaking: it reinvented classical music and married what many thought was a stuffy genre with pioneering technology. When there was great compartmentalizing of music genres, *Switched-On Bach* bridged many divides. The album appealed to music lovers of diverse genres, converted skeptics, and went on to become the second classical album in history to go Platinum.

Moog synths quickly gained popularity with various musicians. With business success mounting, Moog was frustrated because he really just wanted to be an electric engineer and tinkerer, not a business owner. The company was sold and resold until business failures culminated with Moog recovering the legal right to use his name on his products in 2002. Moog was then divided into a profit-sharing business model where all employees are co-owners. Moog passed away from a brain tumor in 2005, just three years after regaining control of his own products and use of his name therein.

Jim DeBardi works in communications for Moog and says that authenticity drives all practices there, from product conception to completion, customer service, branding and marketing. "The instruments we build are analog synthesizers," he says. "Analog is one of the most natural and physical ways to make music — you're manipulating a raw electronic waveform. You remove the layer of electronic translation and keep the authentic signal through an analog circuit. We're authentic at the most basic level of what we're creating."

Bob Moog

Photo courtesy Bob Moog Foundation

Moog debuted synthesizers at the 2015 NAMM conference that haven't been in production for decades: the System 55, System 35 and Model 15. The Moog booth at NAMM the following year was a visual coup in fine style among a wasteland of overblown vendor presentations. Visitors were invited to experiment with modular synths nestled among thriving succulents and cacti while sitting on opulent rugs and pillows. David VanKoevering dropped in to give autographs, and a veritable petting zoo of hardware was on display.

Moog's new modular synthesizers are exact reinventions of the originals and house the same circuits. Moog doesn't call them "reissues" because the production process was so precise and intensive — these are as close to original as possible. They boast hand-soldered circuit boards and handcrafted wire harnesses and circuit placements. DeBardi says, "Parts made 50 years ago were made on a different machine, with different geography. All of these factors have an effect on the final product, so we sourced 'new old' stock components and parts built in the '60s and '70s that were overstock or put away."

While Moog may have never been awarded the recognition he was due in his lifetime, his legacy lives on, as do his values. "Moog was a boundary shifter, prepared to let the culture help shape his instrument … in the end, he was more of a '60s guy than anyone ever realized," writes Trevor Pinch in *Analog Days: The Invention And Impact Of The Moog Synthesizer*. Moog knew he was making tools for artists and constantly worked with artists to understand their needs. Moog wanted nothing of the spotlight — just to engineer tools to exponentially expand an artist's repertoire. ★

BY GARY TALLEY

GUITAR 101

Power Ballads

We've charted quite a few Americana and country songs in this column, but here's something a little different: a chart for a "power ballad." If you're ready for something a little more challenging, get your guitar, grab your capo and try this.

This song was demoed in 2006, and our goal was to "bring it up to date" and make it "less country" than the older demo. We recorded with producer and engineer Fett at Azalea Studios in Nashville. The rhythm section was Ron Krasinski on the studio's drums, Eric Bikales on YAMAHA MOX-8 keyboards, Dave Webb on bass and me on my Santa Cruz OM guitar.

Fett had the idea of using a drum loop, so he found one that sounded like it would fit the song really well. We also bumped up the tempo two or three beats per minute. The first thing I thought when I saw the chart (top right) was, "Wow, that's not 'three chords and the truth!' Maybe 20 chords and the truth." We talked down the chart and decided I would fingerpick on the intro and verses and switch to strumming on the "lift" (pre-chorus) and chorus. That's a pretty common thing to do.

After looking over the chords in A, I decided to use a capo on the second fret and play as if I were in G to get some nice open chord voicings for fingerpicking. I'm a "hybrid" picker (flatpick and acrylic fingernails), which makes an easy switch from picking to strumming.

After listening to the original demo, it became apparent that arpeggios were needed in the intro and bridge on the first and third bars. This was not indicated in the chart, so I'm glad we listened to that. After a couple of passes, Dave switched to a '70s-era Hondo II Professional Fretless bass and ran it through a BOSS GT6-B pedalboard. That really added a lot.

Let's look at the intro: the first bar is a split bar, two beats of G and two beats of D/F#. The keyboards and acoustic guitar both played arpeggios in unison. Guitar players tend to think of a chord as a five- or six-string handful of notes, as opposed to a three-note triad. I didn't play a big fat open G chord and a big fat D/F#. I played three notes on the G chord: G D G and three notes on the D chord: F# D F#, covering just one octave for each chord.

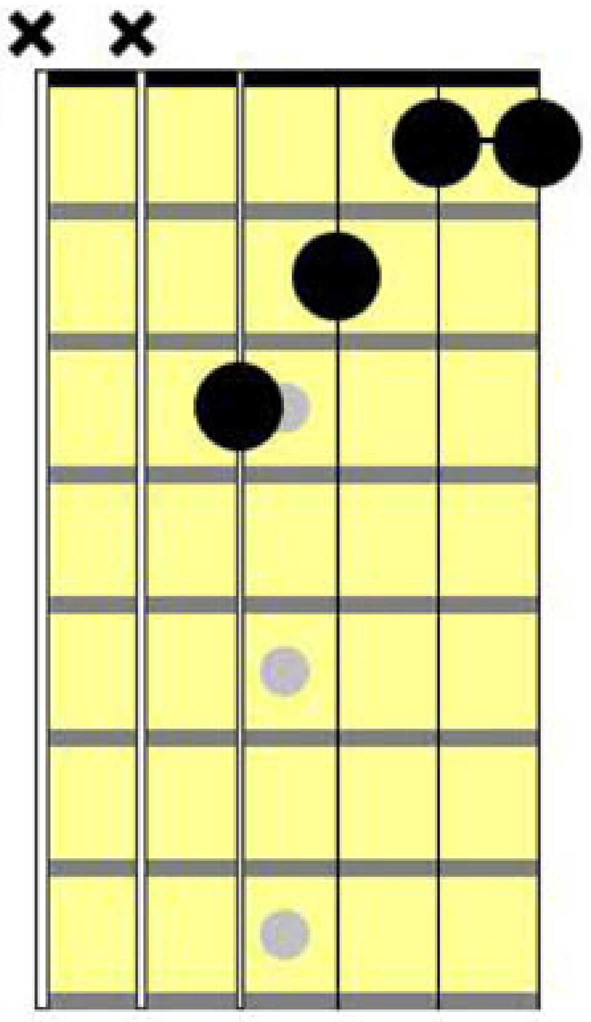
Remember also, we've got our capo on the second fret for this. So what I'm playing looks like F to C/E (diagrams 1 and 2) as opposed to G to D/F#. When you play with a keyboard, you have to be careful about cluttering things up, so you have to pay attention to range and chord voicings more than when you're playing solo. And the bass player and the left hand of the keyboard need to stay out of each other's way, as well.

The beauty of a number chart or chord chart as opposed to a written part is that the player can interpret the music and decide what to play and what not to play based on his or her experience of playing in that particular genre, and, more importantly, what the other musicians are playing at that exact moment in time.

Every chord in the intro is a split bar (two beats for each chord) except the last bar of five, which is in parentheses. This indicates a 2/4 bar. The last four could have also been written as a 2/4 bar, which would have made the last five of the intro a full bar. Are you with me?

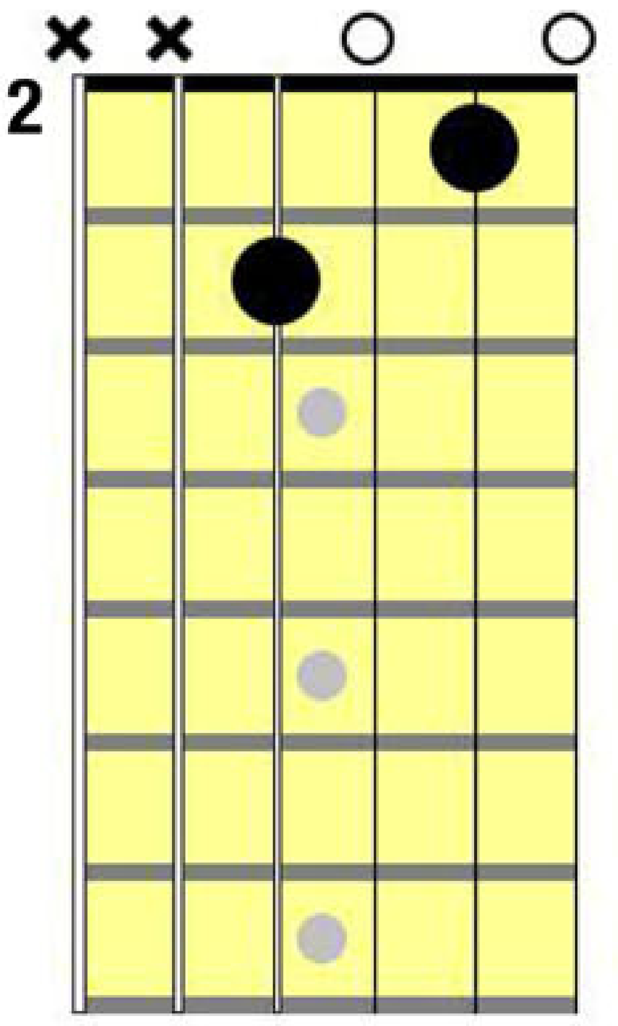
F chord, which is flat 7 in G

1



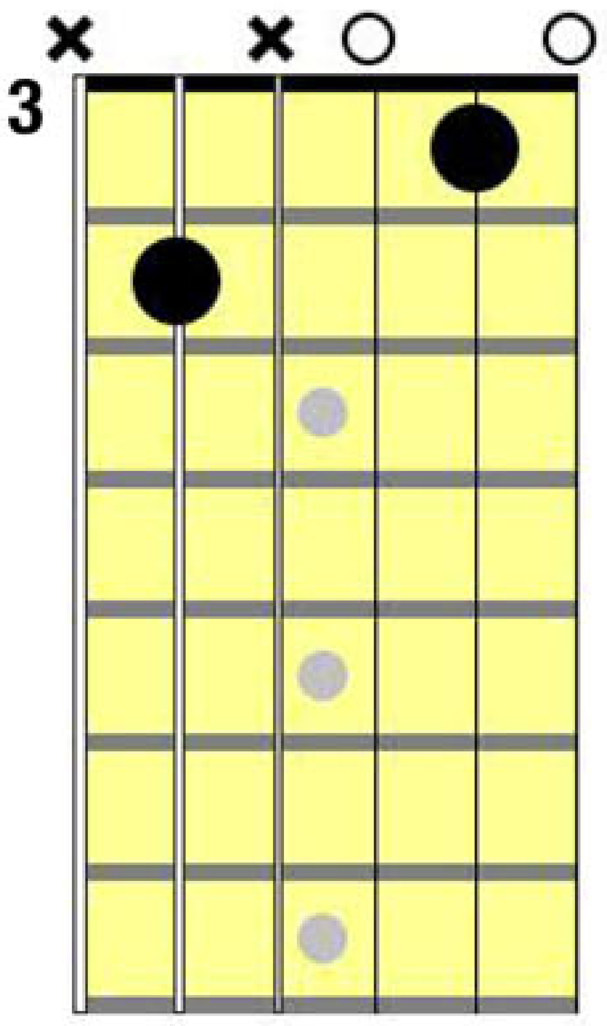
C/E chord , which is 4/6 in G

2



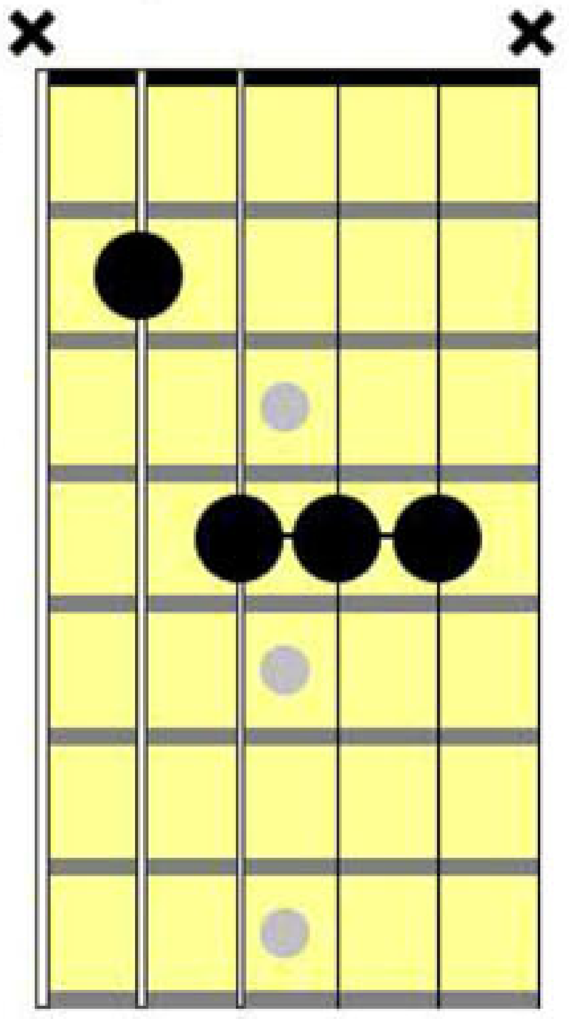
C/B chord, which is 4/3 in the of G

3



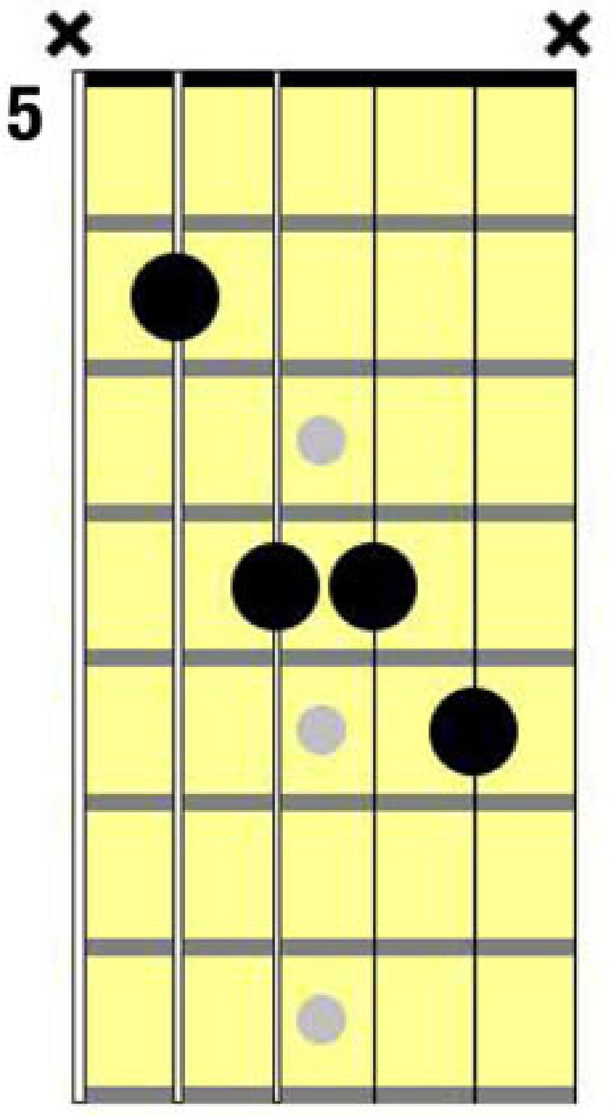
B CHORD, which is a 3 chord in the key of G

4



Bsus4 _

5



If you're ready for something a little more challenging, get your guitar, grab your capo and try this.

Now, in the first line of the verse, second bar, we have two beats of a 4 chord (D) and two beats of a 4/3 (D over C#). However, remember that we're playing acoustic with a capo on the second fret, so what I'm fingering is a C chord with a B in the bass. You find this chord in a lot of Beatles songs. But the catch is, if you play a regular open C and just move the bass note to B that voicing sounds terrible. So you have to leave out the E note (fourth string, second fret) to make it sound better (diagram 3).

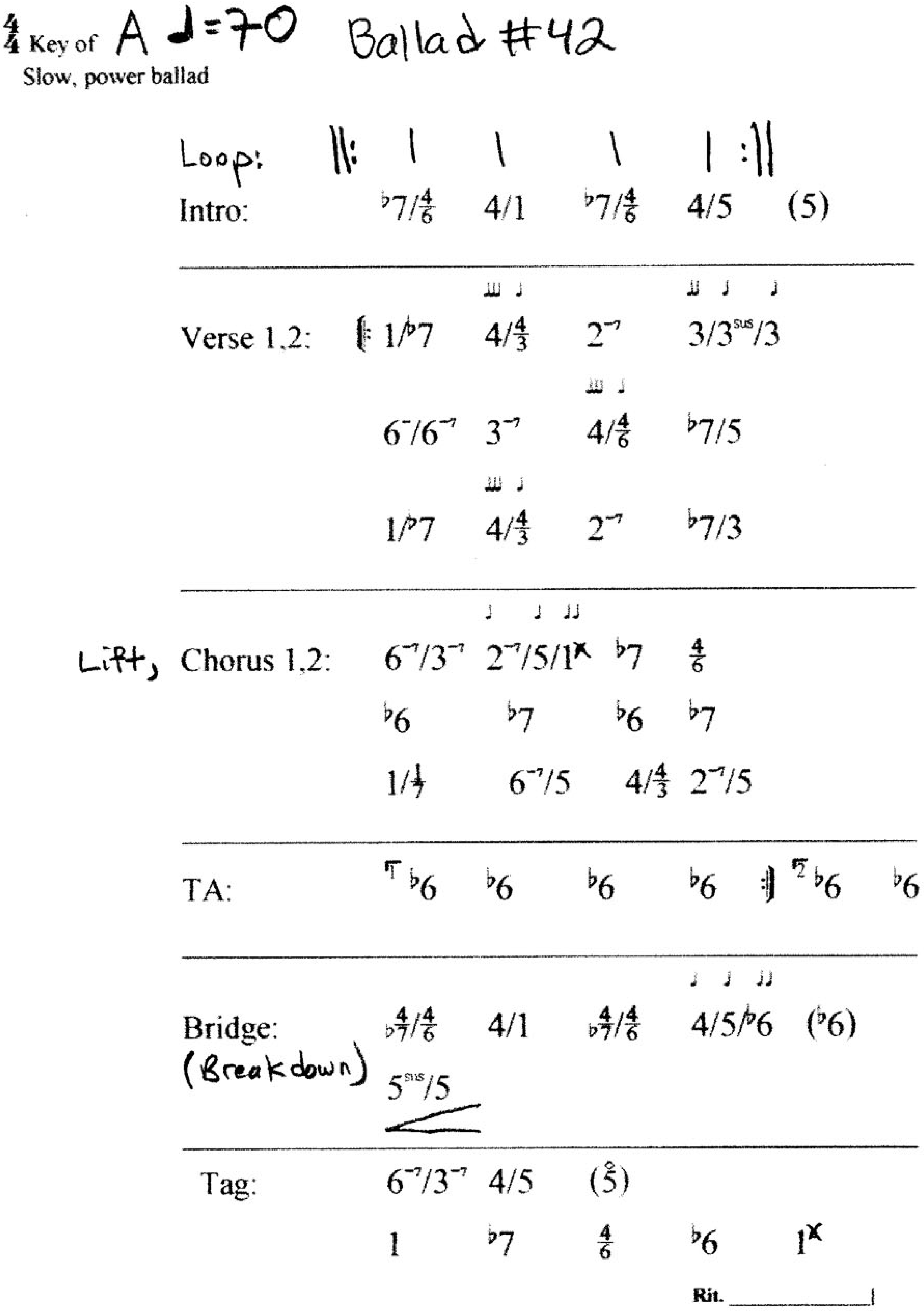
As we continue in the verse, we find that the last bar of the first line of the verse is 3 chord for two beats, then 3sus4 for one beat, and back to 3 chord. Since I'm thinking in G, I play a B (diagram 4) to a Bsus4 (diagram 5) and back.

During the "lift," the second bar is another split bar, but it's divided a different way. The 2m7 is played for one beat, 5 for one beat and the 1 chord. We changed the Ima7 on the chart to a plain 1, because the maj7 sounded a little "corny."

The flat 6 to the flat7 leading up to the one chord is a common "dramatic" sounding chord progression.

The bridge restates the arpeggiated sound of the intro with some harmonic variation. We tag the chorus, and for the last two bars of the ritard at the end the drum loop was turned off.

Now it was my turn for overdubs on the electric guitar for the "power chords" in the lifts and choruses. I used my St. Blues solid-body guitar from Memphis and my Tech 21 Trademark 60 amp on the distortion channel. This is a very versatile amp and guitar combination. I played eighth notes on the lift and whole notes on the chorus. A couple of keyboard overdubs with the help of a Ventilator pedal for organ sounds and we were done. A different, more "pop" sounding singer was brought in later for the lead vocal and it came out sounding great. ★



GARY TALLEY is the original guitarist for Grammy-nominated group The Box Tops. He's toured and recorded with Willie Nelson, Billy Preston, Waylon Jennings and more. His DVD *Guitar Playing for Songwriters* can be purchased at garytalley.com.

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BY DAVID ALZOFON

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Leap Of Faith

Photo courtesy PeterSprague.com

One fine day, I donned my superhero cape – a bath towel held together with a safety pin – clambered up a ladder to the roof, stood bravely on the edge, and jumped. For one glorious moment, I was flying. Then I hit the ground. Hard. Fortunately I was only seven years old and fifty pounds. Nothing was shattered, except my childish dream of flying.

Into the life of every aspiring musician there comes a moment like that, a moment when, in the grip of your dreams, you take a leap of faith into the life of an artist. For jazz guitarist Peter Sprague it came just after high school in the mid-1970s:

"It was like a cliff that I was going to jump off of," Sprague says. "It could have been fraught with danger or failure, because you see so many stories of people becoming musicians and it not working out, and the path that I took was not conventional. You know, usually your parents want you to go to college and do that kind of thing, and I just didn't want to do that. So there were some scary moments there."

I caught up with Peter during a brief gap in his frenetic concert schedule to ask for some flying lessons, because unlike the majority of musicians who leap off the cliff into a career, Peter soared, with 363 recording credits, a raft of awards, and performances with 147 jazz artists, including Chick Corea, Bill Mays, and Sérgio Mendes. And while jazz is Peter's first love, he understands the singer-songwriter's world, too, thanks to similarities in career paths and a powerful musical magnet he can see from his kitchen window: SpragueLand recording studios.

"You know, my studio is a detached building from my house, but it's still right on the property, so I'm not sitting there commuting, I'm just walking out the door to the studio and getting right to work," he says. "And it's turned into a source of musical experiences beyond my live playing ... I've gotten to meet lots of neat people and hear lots of diverse types of music, including a lot of singer-songwriters."

With memories of my ill-fated Superman career in mind, I asked, "What would you tell a young musician who was facing the same cliff today?"

"One of the elements you want is to be in alignment with your parents," he says. "You want to at least attempt that because no matter how it all plays out, having the support and blessing of your parents means a lot, because even if you think that they're wrong, and they don't really know the scene, parents generally have a sense that they have only the well-being of their kids in mind. They have a lot of worldly knowledge that younger people don't have. They might not have the knowledge of the music business or what it means, but if they're solid folks, they'll understand the passion in a young person.

"The next thing is that you would really want to do it only if your passion was extreme. You need to be passionate about it, because it's a long road. It requires as much as being a doctor – as much devotion, and focus and concentration.

"And then you just work hard. You get real with what it takes.

"Next, learn how to live super simply. I'm living a good life now, but for so many years in the beginning I lived a very frugal lifestyle. And somehow I saw, and I'm so glad I saw this, there's an immense amount of freedom in your life if you live simply."

One of the criticisms leveled at avant-garde jazz is that it leaves audiences behind. While Peter can keep up with the best of them, he feels that maintaining an emotional link with the audience is key. How does he do that? Songs:

"And I think for me, and it seems to hit on other people, you can take a song and do some pretty inventive things with it and as long as you don't destroy the melody, as long as you keep the spirit of The Beatles' original version, you can take people on a ride, and they have a connection with it because they know the song, yet 'look at all this new stuff that's happening.' I've taken a couple of Jimi Hendrix songs that are iconic, and they too have that nice harmonic wealth, and good melodies, and they do that same thing. There are a bunch of rock heads that are my age that just love hearing Hendrix that new way" (see petersprague.com/videos/).

The Beatles had Brian Epstein to lead them from Liverpool onto the world stage. The Stones had Andrew Loog Oldham. If you take the leap into a musical career without a pair of wings like those, you'll probably wind up with scraped knees, like me. Yet somehow Peter managed to become airborne on his own. All singer-songwriters could learn a lot from his example, so I have distilled the essence into "Mindset Of A Successful Musician" at Songwriter U (AmericanSongwriter.com). You'll find the whole interview there, too. ★

DAVID ALZOFON is a former editor for *Guitar Player* magazine and the author of two books, most recently, *Compose Yourself!: Songwriting And Creative Musicianship in Four Easy Lessons*. He teaches guitar in San Diego, California.

LYRIC STRUCTURE

Creating Expectations

BY PAT PATTISON

Moms are supposed to provide structure, to organize things so the kids have the right kind of journey, whether to Pirate's Cove or through life. As a songwriter, you're the mom. You get to choose what kind of trip you want your song to take.

Let's go.

"Valentine" by Chanelle Davis

I once had a Valentine
Someone to walk me home

These first two lines create little, if any, expectation. You could be going anywhere. If the next line had been

I once had a Valentine
Someone to walk me home
Someone to say he's mine

Then we'd have expectations. We now know what should come next: a line to match and rhyme with line 2. The principle at work is the Principle of Sequence. Since line 3 mimics line 1, we expect line 4 to mimic line 2. Something like

I once had a Valentine
Someone to walk me home
Someone to say he's mine
Someone who wouldn't go

Now it feels done.

Of course, that's not how the lyric really goes at line 3. It's:

I once had a Valentine
Someone to walk me home
And hear a little midnight saxophone

Mom is being coy here. The line lengths (measured by the number of stressed syllables) are:

I ónce had a Válentíne 3 stresses
Sómeone to wálk me hóme 3 stresses
And héar a líttle mídnight sáxophóne 5 stresses

Ignore the rhyme just for now, and concentrate on the line lengths: They feel unstable and tell us to keep going, though it's not entirely clear where. Though, from the twinkle in mom's eye, it feels like the line lengths should be going somewhere like:

I ónce had a Válentíne 3 stresses
Sómeone to wálk me home 3 stresses
And héar a líttle mídnight saxophone 5 stresses
Da DUM da da DUM da DUM 3 stresses
DUM da da DUM da DUM 3 stresses
Da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM 5 stresses

But, of course, there's that pesky rhyme, dragging its feet by hanging on to line 2:

I once had a Valentine x
Someone to walk me home a
And hear a little midnight saxophone a

Now we're not sure what to do. We're getting mixed stop/go messages from mom. She's really got us set up for a surprise:

I once had a Valentine
Someone to walk me home
And hear a little midnight saxophone
I got kisses in the night
From my Valentine

Not what we expected at all. It feels a little incomplete – a little disappointing. After all that suspense, all we get are two short lines that rhyme. It feels as though we thought we had something to look forward to and it didn't really happen – it stopped short.

Probably feels like you would if you once had a valentine who disappointed you …

Then we start again:

Used to drink my chardonnay
And smoke my cigarette
We danced around the room just silhouettes
I sang Auld Lang Syne
For my Valentine

Same trip. At least we'd been warned what would happen. It feels like two complete sections, both of which feel misty and soaked with longing.

Note especially the two lovely ambiguities:

Used to drink my chardonnay

Since there's no pronoun here, the subject could be "I," "he," or "we." All three work, and stack up on each other to give us a picture of the relationship. He was drinking her Chardonnay and smoking her cigarette. He was a taker, not a giver. But of course, she drank and smoked too, and remembers it fondly. That's when ambiguity works best: two or more meanings, all of which work. "Ambiguity" is, for me, a positive term. It's productive. It deepens meaning. Its contrast is "vagueness," a negative term which promotes confusion – and doesn't commit to anything specific.

"Ambiguity" is, for me, a positive term. It's productive. It deepens meaning. Its contrast is "vagueness."

The second ambiguity:

I sang Auld Lang Syne
For my Valentine

"For" could mean:

1. I performed it, I sang it to him,
2. I sang a farewell song.

Again, both of them work – the best kind of ambiguity: two or more meanings, each of which adds something to the song.

By the end of this verse, it feels like we're probably wandering through an AABA song form. So now, of course, the music moves us away, and, after an interlude, we hear this:

Love does funny things
And when it gives you wings

Unlike the first two lines of the song,

I once had a Valentine
Someone to walk me home

These lines,
Love does funny things
And when it gives you wings

Feel like a unit. If we traded a "w" for a "t,"

Love does funny things
And then it gives you wings

We'd feel like everything was solid. Alas, that pesky "when" asks us to keep going. But notice, it is the content that pushes forward here, not the structure. The content says "I won't be finished until "when" is resolved. And now we hear,

Love does funny things
And when it gives you wings
You're a fool for thinking you can fly

Now the content is resolved, but the structure is, for the first time, clearly telling us where we'll go next:

Love does funny things a 3 stresses
And when it gives you wings a 3 stresses
You're a fóol for thínking you can fly b 4 stresses

The third line is screaming to be matched, ideally by
Love does funny things a 3 stresses
And when it gives you wings a 3 stresses
You're a fóol for thínking you can fly b 4 stresses
DUM da DUM da mark c 3 stresses
Da DUM da DUM da heart c 3 stresses
Da da DUM da DUM da DUM da cry b 4 stresses

Or at least by something like,
Love does funny things a 3 stresses
And when it gives you wings a 3 stresses
You're a fóol for thínking you can fly b 4 stresses
Da da DUM da DUM da DUM da cry b 4 stresses

But what really happens …? Though Mom is chirping away about how much fun we're going to have and how we'll remember this trip all our lives and isn't it wonderful to be so excited, suddenly, poof, she stops the car, and says we're not going anywhere. We turn around and go back where we started:

Love does funny things
And when it gives you wings
You're a fool for thinking you can fly

I once had a Valentine
Someone to walk me home
And hear a little midnight saxophone
I got kisses in the night
From my Valentine

Yikes! We kids howling in the backseat to keep going and whining "It's not fair!" Mom meanwhile is driving us home without an explanation.

Here's the whole trip:

I once had a Valentine
Someone to walk me home
And hear a little midnight saxophone
I got kisses in the night
From my Valentine

Used to drink my chardonnay
And smoke my cigarettes
We danced around the room just silhouettes
I sang Auld Lang Syne
For my Valentine

Love does funny things
And when it gives you wings
You're a fool for thinking you can fly

I once had a Valentine
Someone to walk me home
And hear a little midnight saxophone
I got kisses in the night
From my Valentine

What a perfect journey for the feeling of the song. You thought you had someone special and fell in love, thinking you could fly. Then the strong feeling that something more had to come of it, and then when it didn't, you couldn't even finish telling the story. So you interrupt yourself and return to your original thought, like you'll be repeating it over and over for a long time.

Something special happens with rhyme here. Remember that we could have *kinda* finished the bridge by adding only one line?

Love does funny things a 3 stresses
And when it gives you wings a 3 stresses
You're a fool for thinking you can fly b 4 stresses
Da da DUM da DUM da DUM da cry b 4 stresses

Pretty much the same thing is accomplished here:

Love does funny things
And when it gives you wings
You're a fool for thinking you can fly…

I once had a Valentine

So the unrhymed 3rd line of the bridge "targets" sonically to the title of the song, increasing its visibility and deepening its emotion by turning the spotlight on "Valentine," which now turns mildly ironic.

In most AABA forms, we usually expect the 3rd verse to tie everything up – to make a new and final statement. Here, we've already seen the 3rd verse – we started with it, though now we're looking at it through new eyes and with more emotion. We've felt the disappointment of an interrupted love affair.

The interrupted bridge conspires with the song form, the repetition of the first verse rather than an expansion into the new thought of a 3rd verse, to create a character who will live with this bittersweet feeling forever, always regretting, always feeling like something wasn't finished. Always going backwards time and again, just like the song form. Just like the interrupted bridge.

Nice trip, Mom. ★

Pat Pattison is a professor at Berklee College of Music, where he teaches lyric writing and poetry.

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BY RAND BISHOP

MAKIN' STUFF UP

Exhuming The Writers Group

Photo courtesy J Fred Knobloch

"If you can get in the tree with the monkeys," chuckles J. Fred Knobloch, "you get to eat some bananas." For three spectacular years in the 1980s, everyone on Music Row wanted to join the feast at 1101 17th Avenue South.

"Crazy!" Cliff Audretch Jr. marvels, recalling The Writers Group. "We were so wildly successful in our first year." The recession-era Music Row Audretch had encountered at the cusp of the '80s "…wasn't a ghost town, but it was very, very slim." Having sold 40,000 self-issued LPs, Ohio-based country rockers McGuffey Lane were primed for major label distribution. Thus, their manager, Audretch, needed an accelerated education in the record/music publishing biz. Nashville was the place to procure both.

Audretch found a willing mentor in Jim Malloy, co-proprietor of DebDave/Briar Patch Music, one of the Row's few thriving indie publishing houses — success more than partly due to Malloy's partner, country popster Eddie Rabbitt, seeing sound business sense in padding his hit albums with compositions from the company catalog.

Up-and-coming DebDave staffer Thom Schuyler, however, wasn't content to rest exclusively on Rabbitt album fillers. The Pennsylvania transplant shared credit on Kenny Rogers' 1982 crossover smash "Love Will Turn You Around," before cracking the country top 10 with Lacy J. Dalton's single of his "16th Avenue." Schuyler: "I had a nice run at DebDave. And if I ever had a moment to take a giant step forward, it happened when Writers Group formed."

The Writers Group concept was the brainchild of gregarious session drummer/producer James Stroud. As Eddie Rabbitt's go-to beatkeeper, Stroud frequented the DebDave office. There, he befriended Audretch, while Schuyler was becoming "… joined at the hip, writing a lot of tunes" with Stroud's lifelong Jackson, Mississippi, musical comrade, Fred Knobloch.

Knobloch had pulled his moving truck into Nashville in 1983 wielding some legit singer-songwriter cred — the Stroud-produced pop singles "Why Not Me" and "Killing Time" (dueting with Susan Anton) — and a whopping $64 bank balance. Knobloch: "I was doing everything I could to drag money through the door. Whenever the phone rang, somebody was saying, 'Hey, can you..?' And the answer was 'Yes!'" Using his pop cachet, Knobloch wrangled co-writes with Music Row stalwarts. Within six months, he — with Dan Tyler (Oakridge Boys' "Bobbie Sue") — had a BJ Thomas single.

Fall, 1984. Business is looking up. Music Row coffers are jingling with *Urban Cowboy* royalties. The entrepreneurial Stroud pounces, cajoling six individual investors into financing a fledgling publishing venture in a most unconventional way — by writing monthly checks. Knobloch: "Stroud is so talented and high energy that you say, 'I'm in! I'll follow you, Buddy!'" As Stroud isn't about to stop playing sessions, he summons Audretch to oversee day-to-day operations.

Of himself, Knobloch, and Dan Tyler, Schuyler muses, "We were all floppin' around on the deck trying to figure out what to do next." By snapping up those three, Stroud already had a crackerjack writing staff. Then, R. S. Field and Mitch Humphries came aboard. The total magical equation, however, was not yet complete.

At Schuyler's urging, Stroud and Audretch drafted two additional and, as it turned out, essential players: DebDave junior plugger Robin Palmer (as creative director) and another singer-songwriter who'd "… been kicking around with nothing much happening" — Paul Overstreet.

January, 1985. Good news: Producer Kyle Lehning plans to cut "On The Other Hand" (Overstreet/Don Schlitz). Bad news: Lehning plans to cut the tune Schuyler considered "… one of the best country songs I'd ever heard" with an unproven stringbean named Randy Travis. Schuyler is pissed: "I was trying to get Jones or Haggard on it."

Schuyler's consternation proved to be sooth. Stringbean's single peaked at #67. Abruptly, however, the fates turned. After Travis' follow-up, "1982," went top 10, the re-released "On The Other Hand" shot to #1, and the *Storms Of Life* LP was rocketing toward quadruple platinum.

By that summer, The Writers Group, too, was blasting off. Audretch: "We had the number one, two, *and* three songs — in the *same week*!" "Modern Day Romance" (Dirt Band — Tyler/Kix Brooks), "I Fell In Love Again Last Night" (Forester Sisters — Schuyler/Overstreet) and "Used To Blue" (Sawyer Brown — Knobloch/Bill LaBounty). "I almost got fired," Audretch snickers. "Those nervous investors thought I was lying on my monthly reports."

Spring, 1986. Overstreet takes Travis to the top again with the darkly humorous "Diggin' Up Bones," ("… exhumin' things that's better left alone"), while his soon-to-be-classic Schlitz cowrite "Forever and Ever, Amen" waits on deck.

Hours together in the studio cemented company comradery. Drummer Stroud and guitarist Knobloch, with Mitch Humphries and/or Carson Whitsett on keys, cranked out master-quality demos, enhanced by tight Schuyler-Knobloch-Overstreet harmonies. One such demo, "You Can't Stop Love" (Schuyler/Overstreet), became the vocal trio's first single release as S-K-O — after an impromptu 1986 benefit performance, MTM Records' Tommy West surprised the hit-making triumvirate with an out-of-the-blue contract offer.

March, 1987. S-K-O's "Baby's Got a New Baby" (Knobloch/Tyler) hits #1 — the first of countless James Stroud productions to top the country charts.

By year's end, a buy-out offer from EMI/Screen Gems proved too tempting for Stroud's nervous, impatient investors. Audretch, Palmer, Schuyler, and Knobloch moved on to EMI with the catalog, while Overstreet, Tyler, et al begged out — and none of the ultra-gifted songwriters responsible for the extraordinary success of The Writers Group received a nickel from the sale. ★

A four-decade music biz vet, **RAND BISHOP** (www.randbishop.com) has been a major label recording artist, session singer, A&R exec, platinum producer, and hit publisher. As a songwriter, he counts more than 250 cuts, including country radio's most played song of 2002, "My List," (Toby Keith).

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BY ALICE RANDALL

Beyoncé's "Daddy Lessons" Is Classic Country Music

With "Daddy Lessons" Queen Bey schools the bro-country boys in how to write a 21st-century, hard country anthem that is relevant, revelatory, and rooted.

What makes a song country? Evangelical Christianity and African musical influences? Check. Concerns with family legacy? Check. Love of whiskey and guns? Check. Offering advice? Check. Feeling sentimental about Bible-thumping and open roads? Check. Putting child-rearing and sibling relations over sexual adventures with lovers or bonds with friends? Check. Honoring the patriarchy? Check. Concerns with good and evil and a determination to be good? Check. Shouting out to Texas? Check. Horse-opera riffs that remind us cowboy movies helped make country *country*? Check. Doing right by Mama and listening to Daddy? That's all country.

The most obvious country song to compare "Daddy Lessons" to is the Miranda Lambert and Heather Little co-write, "Gunpowder And Lead." Like "Daddy Lessons" (which Beyoncé wrote with Wynter Gordon, Kevin Cossom, and Alex Delicata), "Gunpowder And Lead" mixes images of girlhood (ragdolls and nursery rhymes) with shotguns, puts a weapon in a good girl's arms, then points it straight at a bad boy's heart.

Another related song: "Cleaning This Gun," written by Casey Beathhard and Marla Cannon-Goodman, recorded by Rodney Atkins. In this tune, a young suitor threatened with a gun by his girlfriend's father grows up to be a father who threatens his daughter's suitor with a gun of his own.

The fathers in "Cleaning This Gun" and "Daddy Lessons" are equally aware that young men will show up at their daughter's door with the same sexual motives they once had. The father in "Cleaning This Gun" steps to the boy and waves his gun in the boy's face; the father in "Daddy Lessons" steps to his daughter brandishing advice: if she sees someone on her doorstep like him, she better "shoot."

The daughter in "Daddy Lessons" is no one's victim. In "Gunpowder And Lead," that heroine is injured and she's seeking revenge and fighting back. Beyoncé gets the first lick in.

She's a thriver, thanks in no small part to her imperfect father. Appreciating imperfect fathers is a country thing. No one covers that territory better than Bob McDill in his 1980 masterpiece "Good Ole Boys Like Me," sung by Don Williams. The daddy in "Good Ole Boys" is an imperfect man who tucks his son into bed "with gin on his breath and a Bible in his hand." This is territory not far from the whiskey in the tea of the Bible-clutching Pa in "Daddy Lessons." McDill gives us references to Tennessee Williams and Hank Williams; Beyoncé nods to the poetry of Warsan Shire and the field recordings of Alan Lomax. What do we do with good ole girls like Bey?

"Daddy Lessons" also programs perfectly before or after "Fancy." "Fancy," penned and originally performed by Bobbie Gentry, is one of the greatest country advice songs of all time. Here, a mother advises her daughter to take up whoring. It would seem impossibly horrible bad advice if the Pa hadn't "run off," the Ma wasn't "real sick," the baby wasn't about to "starve to death," and a "roach" hadn't just "crawled across the tip" of the girl's "high-heeled shoe." In "Fancy" as in "Daddy Lessons," the seemingly inappropriate but ultimately necessary advice serves to create a visceral understanding of the true difficulty of life.

Everything's always all right in bro-country land. Never anything wrong a pretty girl and a drink can't fix. Like Haggard, Cash, and Jennings, Miranda and Bey know better.

"Daddy Lessons" is a very complex song. It seems simple. It's not. That's a lot like Johnny Cash's "Don't Take Your Guns to Town." "Daddy Lessons" takes on the country themes of legacy and inheritance, so often braided to the country theme of unbroken circles, throws in a Gene Autry "Guns And Guitars"-evoking riff, then weaves in Beyoncé's very own take on the subject of feminine adventuring by reclaiming not the territory of the body — as she does so brilliantly in her non-country songs — but here, in her country song, the territory of the open road, the gun, the constitution, the motorcycle, the patriarchy, the love of Mama, the Bible.

The brilliance of Beyoncé is that she inhabits this country without invitation and creates, once she is there, something even more complex and powerful than the complex and powerful songs already on the country airwaves — something that reveals how parents can empower their children to take what they are given *and* to do something altogether new with their inheritance.

In "Daddy Lessons," the daughter receives wisdom from her father and a rifle. When it comes time to "put the fear of God to some boy at the door," she's going to handle it her own damn self. And that's country. Ask Miranda Lambert.

In 1970 Clarence Carter had a huge hit with "Patches," a General Johnson– and Ron Dunbar–penned song, set "way back in the woods" in Alabama. Patches puts his whole family on his back, then stands, emboldened by Daddy's "strictest rule." George Jones covered "Patches." For decades I have declared "Patches" to be the greatest country family advice song of all time. Now I give that title to "Daddy Lessons." ★

Alice Randall is currently Writer-in-Residence at Vanderbilt University, where she teaches the course "Country Lyric in American Culture." Her song "XXX's and OOO's (An American Girl)" was a number one hit for Trisha Yearwood.

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NEVER STANDING STILL

BY ADAM GOLD

Living Proof

Bruce Springsteen proves himself the Benjamin Button of rock with four-hour Philly show.

Bruce Springsteen & the E Street Band performing on the River Tour, February 2016.

Photo by C Michael Stewart

On December 8, 1980, Bruce Springsteen and his E Street bandmates walked off stage at the Philadelphia Spectrum after turning in a three-and-a-half hour show typical of the legend that now precedes them. It was one of many nights in the City of Brotherly Love that the E Street faithful in attendance would never forget, and for the worst reason. As Bruce and the band strode toward the dressing room, a roadie delivered the shocking news that John Lennon had been shot.

The next night Springsteen and band returned to the Spectrum. "It's hard to come out and play tonight when so much has been lost," Springsteen told the crowd. "The first record I ever learned was a record called 'Twist And Shout,' and if it wasn't for John Lennon, we'd all be in some place very different tonight." Then he cracked a hole in the sky and counted the band into "Born To Run."

It was two months into the original River Tour and Springsteen was still standing in the shadows of giants, proving all night, every night that rock and roll mattered, that rock and roll could give life in the face of death. Thirty-six years later, on September 7, Springsteen, a few weeks shy of 67, stood in his own shadow, looking like he had even more to prove as, E Street Band in tow, he stepped onstage for the first of two shows at Citizen's Bank Park.

Bruce Springsteen has been in an uncharacteristically nostalgic mood in 2016. When The River Tour kicked off in January the jaunt featured start-to-finish performances of the singer's 1980 double album. By the time the trek wrapped with a run of East Coast stadiums, River songs fell out of rotation, making way for requests, audibles and the loose spontaneity behind the mythic shows Boss fans chase. This was a monster run of record-breaking marathon gigs rife with potent performances and set-list heroin the strength of which the E Street nation had never seen.

The first 90 minutes in Philly felt like a fever dream — a 12-song opening stretch consisted solely of pre-1975 deep cuts from *Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J.* and *The Wild, The Innocent And The E Street Shuffle* era. Long, messy, jazzy, wordy songs like "Kitty's Back" and "Thundercrack." *Greetings* and *Wild, Innocent* are disorderly records that capture Springsteen's youth as he runs to catch every idea before it races away from him; production-wise they hardly foresee "the future of rock and roll." In 2016, raved-up "Rosalitas" and a reflective "Incident On 57th St." reveal buried nuances the way that memories teach better lessons than a moment.

"Before my biography, this was my biography," Springsteen said with a lock-jawed chuckle, plucking away over Roy Bittan's tinkling piano intro to "Growin' Up." But when the crowd belted along to lines about walking on crooked crutches and finding the keys to the universe in old parked cars, they weren't singing Springsteen's story, they were singing their own stories and the stories of characters who became miserable companions in lonely times.

This makes even the darkest moments of a Springsteen show a communal event. It's what inevitably finds them all pumping fists together during "Badlands" and taking selfies together during "Dancing In The Dark" by the end of the night. It's the reason that these concerts are addictive revivals that keep Springsteen's music from, as he writes in autobiography *Born To Run*, "receding into rock's glorious but embalmed past." Every night when Springsteen counts off "Born To Run" and the house lights come up, the song is just as much a living, breathing thing as it was when it opened the show the night after Lennon's assassination.

This is what Springsteen still has to prove in 2016, that, despite tour after tour, and he still makes music that matters. Folks in the back of the stadium might not have noticed when E Street saxophonist Jake Clemons, standing out of the spotlight, raised his arms in a hands-up-don't-shoot pose during "American Skin (41 Shots)," a painfully prescient song that's sadly more relevant in 2016 than it was in 1999. "The Rising" stands as a rousing anthem that heals America a little bit more with every performance. The grand theme of The River and this tour is that life is a race against time, where your reality fights a William Wallace-worthy battle with your dreams as the sand slips through the hourglass. But Springsteen's figured out a neat trick to slow his aging — that as long he's performing his songs, they'll never get old. But they will get wiser, and better.

As September 7 turned into September 8 and fireworks erupted above the ballpark, thousands in the crowd had their eyes on the clock as Bruce and company rocked out a closing "Bobby Jean." A sign in the pit said it all: "Break your record." At four hours and two minutes, this would be Springsteen's longest U.S. concert to date, and second-longest of his career

"Pretty sure I'm in the 220-230 [shows] range," one Springsteen die-hard told *American Songwriter* after the first Philly gig. "And that was top three." ★

BY TAYLOR GOLDSMITH

Taylor Goldsmith On Will Oldham

Will Oldham, a.k.a. Bonnie 'Prince' Billy.

Photo by N & M Photography

I'm right in the middle of reading the book, *Will Oldham On Bonnie 'Prince' Billy*, edited by Alan Licht, and currently listening to a lot of Oldham's music, so he's been on my mind lately. I was introduced to Oldham's records *Superwolf* and *I See A Darkness* by my oldest pal Blake Mills, who has always had a perfect sense of what kind of songwriters would resonate with me.

I listen closely to Blake's recommendations, but with Oldham my appreciation took an extra second. I knew I liked the songs but there were elements I felt like I didn't have access to, qualities of a strong personality that I needed to understand a little better before really getting on board. For me, the records *Master And Everyone* and *Greatest Palace Music* put everything else into perspective. I fell in love with all of Oldham's songs and had to get a hold of every record. This is part of the process with every artist with whom I fall in love. They challenge me by being true originals, being so fearlessly and effortlessly themselves, that, based on what they've shown me, I have to reconfigure all the possibilities of what songwriting can be. I felt this when I first discovered other greats like Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell or Warren Zevon.

The book I mention above is a series of interviews with Oldham. He talks about a relationship with songwriting that seems very uniquely his own. None of his songs are about him, and they're "meant to have a psychic, rather than factual, bearing on the listener … It's real life of the imagination. I will always rewrite a song that seems like it is too connected to a real event, because the intention is always to create a hyperreal event, so that, ideally, more people can relate to it." I only wish this powerful observation on the hyperreality of songwriting was as obvious and as natural to me as it was to Will.

Oldham doesn't exploit his own relationships and experiences.

Songwriting, if the songwriter's relationship with storytelling isn't carefully looked after and tended to, can unfortunately be a means by which one indulges one's narcissistic tendencies. Oldham seems to have understood that from the day he began writing songs. He's mindful of that spiritual and cathartic potential that goes along with being an artist. Oldham doesn't exploit his own relationships and experiences or dwell on his darker and more hopeless attitudes because he sees how well it sells; rather, Oldham holds fast to the idea of art-as-enlightenment, of art-as-transcendence.

This has been an invaluable lesson for me. For the past few years now in my own music I've found a growing urge to get away from writing my own life. I felt like this confessional songwriting was damaging to myself, and more importantly, unfair to those around me. But I couldn't have articulated this dilemma at the time, at least not until I started trying to deconstruct my appreciation for Oldham's music and figure out why it hit me so hard. Personal experiences will always inspire songs, but I'm learning that the "experience" in and of itself is never what draws a listener to the material but rather what the song suggests or offers in a broader sense, beyond that personal experience … i.e., the "hyperreal event" that Oldham is talking about. Therefore, if a writer can get their hands on the heart of the matter, the raw manna of why a good song hits us so hard, they don't need to hook listeners by dealing in personal details that can sometimes feel indecent, or at the very least, manipulative.

As a role model, Will Oldham has shaped my broader approach to songwriting. But in writing this appreciation I didn't quite have the chance to discuss all of the incredible songs on the 28 (I think?) albums and countless singles … or the incredible voice … or the inspired approach to playing live. I love all of Oldham's work and couldn't recommend him more as an artist of transcendence and enlightenment.

It's important, as a songwriter, to reevaluate every once in a while what it is you spend most of your time doing; to make sure that it is edifying and not too destructive. Songwriting, or art in general, is a good example of one of those things that can kind of go both ways; but I'm grateful that there are artists like Will Oldham out there to remind me of the power of music and great songwriting. ★

Taylor Goldsmith is a singer and songwriter for the rock band Dawes.

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